

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MARCH 2001 **MAGAZINE**

CHINESE PUZZLE

The overnight
guest vanished—
leaving a Chinese
character on
the notepad
PAUL G. REEVE

Plus...

Brendan DuBois
Michael Lewin
Kathy Lynn Emerson

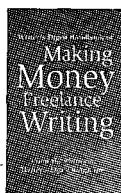
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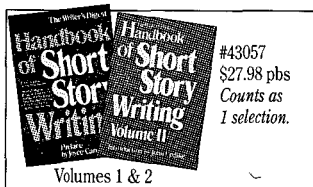
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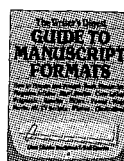


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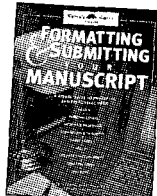
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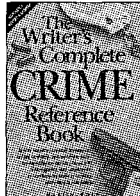
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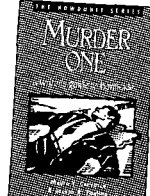
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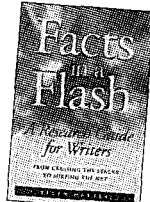
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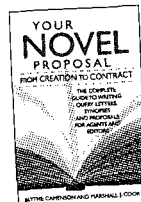
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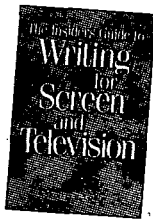
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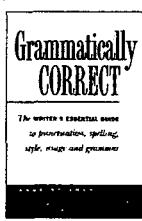
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

In our November issue we mentioned the then forthcoming collection, *The Best American Mystery Stories 2000*, edited by Donald Westlake, series editor Otto Penzler (Houghton Mifflin). The book is now available, in both hardcover and paperback. We said then that it contained Bentley Dammun's "Annie's Dream" as well as other AHMM stories; those others are Tom Berdine's "Spring Rite" (December 1999) and David Edgerley Gates' "Compass Rose" (September 1999).

We are, of course, sure that those three are the hands-down best, but there are seventeen other stories, no doubt pretty darn good!

We're pleased to welcome Kathy Lynn Emerson to AHMM with "Lady Appleton and the Cautionary Herbal." There are five novels to date in the Lady Appleton series (hardcover: St. Martin's Minotaur; paperback: Kensington Mystery);

the most recent is *Face Down Under the Wych Elm*. The events in our story occur between those in *Face Down Among the Winchester Geese* and *Face Down Beneath the Eleanor Cross*. Ms. Emerson has written two other short stories (for the anthologies *More Murder They Wrote* and *Murder Most Medieval*), numerous novels, and several non-fiction volumes including *The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life in Renaissance England* (1996), which Amazon.com calls "the next best thing to a time machine."

For more information about her characters, go to her Web site:

www.kathylynnemerson.com

Finally, a word about our Mystery Classic. Back in our December 1993 issue the Classic carried this note: "We depart this time (we think) from the fictitious crime tale to True Life." Well, we've done it again. But we thought you'd enjoy it—even if Shirley Jackson didn't.

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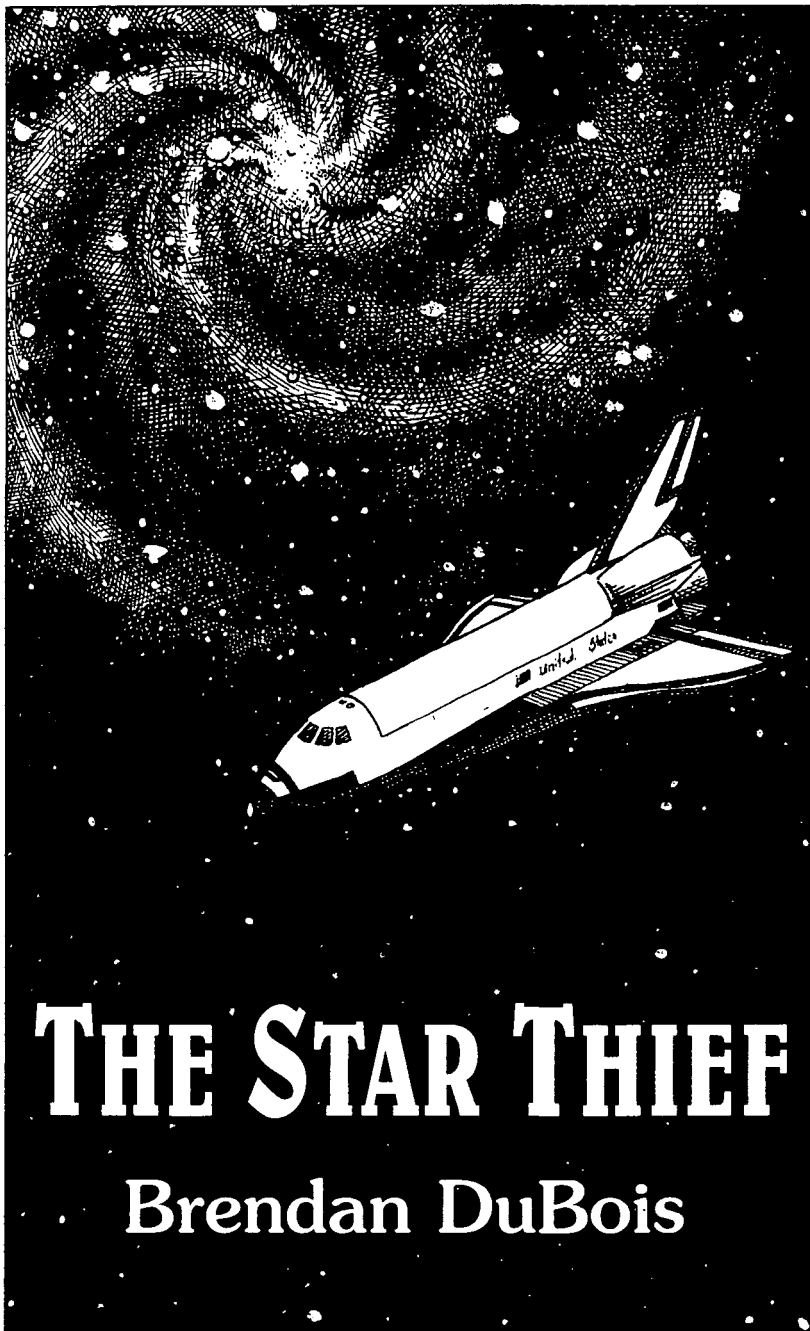
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FICTION



THE STAR THIEF

Brendan DuBois

Illustration by Tatjana Mai-Wyss

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/01

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Mick Sloan checked the time as he washed his hands at the bathroom sink. Damn. Because of the non-sense of the past several minutes, he'd have to forgo breakfast this morning, and he had a busy day planned, a quite busy one, and he could have used a good meal. He glanced up at the bathroom mirror and caught a glimpse of the bathtub behind him, and the foot that was sticking out. The foot had on a black sock and a polished black shoe. When he was done washing his hands and had cleaned out the crusty red stains from underneath his fingernails, he quickly went to work, wetting down all of the bathroom towels in cold water and going back over to the tub. The man in the tub had a blue blazer on, red necktie, and a hotel nametag that said KENNY. As he draped the towels over the man's body, Mick said, "Sorry about that, Kenny, but if you hadn't been so damn noisy, we could have avoided all of this."

When he was done, he went into the room and flipped on the air conditioner, as high as possible, and drew the shades against the early morning Florida sun. With any luck Kenny hadn't told anyone where he was going, and right now, luck was what Mick needed. He rubbed at the smooth skin on his jaw as he packed his few belongings. That's where the problem had started, when he had shaved off his beard and had gotten his hair cut. Kenny had gotten suspicious about his entering the room—since he looked so different from the previous day—and had started asking questions.

Mick was never one for answering questions, especially from the guys in the world like Kenny, and when the pushing started, Mick pushed right back and escalated, right to a full exchange.

He flipped on the television set for one last look. That had always been his talent, he thought. Other guys would dilly-dally, think of the different options, think of what was right, and while all that thinking was going on, Mick was getting the job done.

On the television screen was the picture he'd been waiting for, from the NASA Select channel. The space shuttle *Columbia*, on its pad, getting ready for a launch in seven hours.

A lot could happen in seven hours.

He looked down at the open knapsack. Inside was his 9 mm Smith & Wesson, two extra clips, and a U.S. Army Model V anti-personnel hand grenade nestled among his shorts and polo shirts. The hand grenade was a bit of an overkill, but he was never one to go into a situation under armed.

Not his style. He zipped the knapsack and left the room, and hung a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the outside door handle. He looked up at the morning sky. Clear. If he were lucky, the weather would hold, the maid wouldn't come to this room, and he'd get to the Kennedy Space Center with no problems.

He thought of the dead hotel security man in his room. Sure. Luck.

At what age did it start, he wondered, when he knew he was dif-

ferent? He wasn't sure, but it had to have been when his younger brother started getting older, and when his mother and father had started yapping after him when they saw how successful his brother was becoming. How come you're not more like your brother? He doesn't get into trouble like you, he doesn't get bad grades like you, the teachers don't send notes home about him, yadda yadda yadda.

So what. He didn't particularly like his younger brother, but he didn't particularly dislike him, either. Their house was a small Cape in a forgotten corner of Vermont, and Dad and Mom both worked at the local marble quarry—Dad manhandling the cutting equipment, Mom balancing the books in the company's office. He and his brother shared an upstairs bedroom, with Mom and Dad in the other bedroom. Early on they had come to an agreement over the room—an imaginary line ran down the center, and if everyone stayed on their own side, things were fine.

On his side were piles of clothes, magazines about cars and motorcycles, and posters of Richard Petty. On his brother's side was a bookshelf and plastic models, carefully put together and painted, made up of jet planes and rockets. There was a single poster on the wall, a big map of the moon.

One night he watched his brother sitting up in bed doing his homework on a laptop table he had made from scrap lumber. He was on his own bed reading a girlie mag he had hidden inside a motorcycle magazine. He looked over at the

grim expression on his brother's face and said, "What are you working on?"

"Algebra."

"Is it fun?" he asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"No, I hate it!" his brother said. "It's all letters and symbols. Numbers I can understand. I can't understand letters in math."

"So why are you doing it?"

"Because I have to, that's why."

He laughed. "Kiddo, let me tell you a little secret. That's all crap they slop at you, all the time, in church, in school, and at home. You don't have to do a thing you don't want to do, ever."

"You do if you want to go places."

Another laugh. "The game's rigged, little brother. You think a couple of guys like us are going anywhere? Face it, when we were born here, we were set for life. That's the plan. Grow up and go to high school, marry your local sweetheart, and march into the quarry to cut stone for another generation. That's the plan, and I'm having no part of it. All your schoolwork ain't gonna make a difference."

"You have another plan?"

He winked, turned the pages of the magazine. "Sure, and it has nothing to do with them. I'm gonna do what I want no matter what, and I get what I want. That's it. Simple and to the point."

His brother smiled. "I think I'll stick with algebra."

It was cool enough in the morning air that he didn't have to flip on the air conditioning in the car. He got onto Route A1A in Cocoa Beach

and headed north, up to the Cape. Traffic was light, and he went by the T-shirt emporiums, fast food joints, motels, hotels, and other stores. On one sign outside a hotel black letters hung in the morning air, like they were advertising the early bird dinner special. This message said GOOD LUCK COLUMBIA.

Right, he thought. Luck.

He followed the curve of the road as it went up the coast past cube office buildings with names of aerospace companies: Rockwell, Boeing, Lockheed Martin. Beyond the office parks was a long stretch of flat, dusty land and then a cruise ship terminal with huge ships moored at docks that looked like skyscrapers tilted on their sides. Up ahead the horizon was a bit muddy, but he thought he could make out the gantries and buildings of the Kennedy Space Center. As he drove, he kept his speed at a constant fifty-five even though he was passed on the left and right by other cars and drivers who didn't care as much as he did. His foot flexed impatiently on the accelerator, but he kept his cool. No way did he want to stand out, this close to the prize. Which is why when he got into Cocoa Beach, he had gotten his hair cut and shaved his beard. Didn't want to look like a freak on this morning.

A schoolbus passed him and then another. Of course, cutting his hair and shaving his beard had done exactly the opposite—it had gotten him noticed, had gotten him face-to-face with someone who didn't back down, and while he was heading north on this fine Florida highway, back at his hotel room Kenny

was resting in his bathtub. Maybe Kenny wasn't sleeping with the fishes, but it was pretty close.

Route A1A became Route 528, and after a few miles there was an intersection, for Route 3, and he took a right, heading north. Traffic was getting heavier and the road was four lane, and he still couldn't believe how flat everything was. The grass was green and the brush and the trees were ugly, with sharp points and odd knobs, and nothing looked particularly attractive. His different business interests had brought him to this state off and on during the past few years, before he started getting tired, but he had never really gotten the feel of the place. Everything seemed too bright, too new, too plastic.

Traffic was thicker as the houses and businesses began thinning out. Taillights flickered as cars and trucks slowed. He looked ahead. There was an American flag flapping in the breeze next to a full-scale Mercury-Redstone rocket complete with Mercury capsule on top. Two similar setups had lofted Shepard and Grissom into space back in 1961. He couldn't tell from this distance if the rocket were real or just a mock-up. But he was sure of one thing: the sign welcoming him to Gate 2 at the Kennedy Space Center, and the armed guards standing next to the guard shack.

He reached over and unzipped the top flap of the knapsack and waited.

At some time in their brotherly relationship after a few raucous

battles, they had made a vow never to rat out each other to their parents, which is why he never really bothered to hide what he did from his younger sibling. One night, swaying a bit because of his drinking and high on what he had just done, he stood in the dim light of a reading lamp over his bed, emptying his pockets onto the frayed bedspread. Crumpled and grease-stained bills fluttered into a pile, with pictures of Washington, Lincoln, Hamilton, and Jackson staring up at him.

There was a noise in the bedroom, and he turned. Another light came on, and his little brother rolled over, rubbing at his eyes.

"What's up with that?" younger brother asked.

Not that he ever cared what his younger brother thought about him, but still, he felt proud of what he had done. "What's up?" he said, speaking clearly, not wanting the words to slur. "What's up is that I'm working my way to my new career, that's what. See that?" He picked up a fistful of the bills and said, "See? This is what the old man earns in a week, kissing butt and going up to that stinking quarry. Right here, and I earned this in one night, just one night."

Younger brother rubbed at his eyes again. "How did you get all that money?"

He laughed. "How else? Somebody had it and I took it. Nothing more than that. A thief, that's what I am, and a damn good one." Of course there was more than just being a thief. There was the feeling of going into that gas station, next

county over, and seeing the fear in the attendant's face, the fear that made him feel strong, like he counted. The money was just extra. That thrill was what mattered, and he could hardly wait to try it again.

Younger brother shook his head. "That's wrong, and you know it."

"Nope," he said. "What was wrong was being born in this stinking town and having your whole life laid out for you. You can do what you want, but I'm not following the blueprint. I'm doing my own thing."

"Neither am I," his brother said bravely. "I'm not following the blueprint, either. I'm doing the same thing you are, except I'm not going to jail."

He sat down heavily on the bed, started flattening out the crumpled bills. "Sure," he said. "You're going to college and then to the moon. Make sure you send me some green cheese when you get there."

Younger brother switched off his light. "If whatever prison you're in takes packages, I'll send some along."

For a moment he thought about going over and pounding the crap out of him—he had learned long ago that putting a pillow over his head muffled his screams so their parents didn't hear a thing—but he was tired and slightly drunk and he wanted to count his money, his wonderful money, the only thing that counted.

At the gated entrance Mick pulled his hand out of his knapsack—silently saying to himself, test number one approaching—and he held up the vehicle pass with

the drawing of the shuttle and the mission number on the outside.

Shazam, he thought, as the guard merely waved him through and he was in, joining another line of cars, heading north.

I'll be damned, he thought. Maybe we can pull this off after all.

He stayed on the narrow two lane road, heart thumping as he realized that with each passing second he was getting closer and closer to making it all happen. He passed a sign that said SHUTTLE LAUNCH TODAY, and he found himself speeding up. Close, it was getting close.

Then the road came to an overpass and a large sign pointed to the left, saying SPACEPORT USA. He made a left-hand turn, and after another couple of minutes of driving, the roadway bordered on each side by low drainage ditches, he saw the Spaceport USA tourist facility on his left. It was a collection of low white buildings with a full-size space shuttle mock-up front and another sign at the entrance that said GODSPEED COLUMBIA AND HER CREW.

The parking lots next to the buildings were all named after shuttles, and he didn't particularly care which lot he ended up in. But in the end he followed orange vest clad parking lot attendants, who waved him along. He pulled his rental car in next to a minivan and got out, knapsack in hand. He decided to leave the keys in the ignition.

He followed the other people, who were streaming into an open doorway that was half hidden near

the Spaceport buildings, the visitors' center for the Kennedy Space Center. It felt odd being with these friends and family members, for only the special ones were here today, the ones with connections. The early morning sun was quite hot, and off to the left was a place called the Rocket Garden, with about a half dozen rockets, held up by wires and cables, reaching to the bright Florida sky. He wanted to go over to the garden and poke around, but first things first. There was a little paperwork to take care of.

Inside the office—called Room 2001 by someone with a sense of humor—was a set of counters with signs overhead indicating lines for visitors and industry representatives. He went to an open space at the counter and whispered, "Time for test number two," and as he went up to the woman, he carefully put his free hand in the knapsack, around the handle of his 9 mm.

"Can I help you?" asked a woman at the counter, and Mick smiled. By God he knew it was a stereotype and cliché and all that, but he loved women from the South. They wore too much makeup and too much jewelry and their clothes were either too tight or cut too short, and he loved it all. This one was a redhead with long painted fingernails and a short yellow dress that exposed an impressive amount of freckled cleavage. Mick wished he had more time to spend with this woman, but wishes wouldn't do much today.

"Yes, you can," he said. "I should be on the visitors' list. Mick Sloan."

"Well, let's see," she said, drawing out her Southern drawl, and Mick couldn't stop grinning, though he did keep his hand on his pistol. As before, first things first, and if things went bad, and getting out of here meant taking this pretty young thing as a hostage, that's what he'd do. No hard feelings. Just what had to be done.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Very well, Mr. Sloan. You're on the list." She passed him a stuffed cardboard folder bordered in orange. "Here's your official press kit for the mission." Then she passed over a small pin that showed a drawing of the shuttle and letters underneath: LAUNCH GUEST.

"Make sure you wear this pin at all times, and follow the directions of your guide," she said. "Oh, and here's the mission patch. It must have fallen out of the press kit."

She slid the mission patch across the counter and then stopped, smiling. "Why, look here. One of the astronaut names here is Sloan. Same as yours. A relative?"

Mick picked everything up and kept on smiling. "Yes, you could say that. A relative."

Another night, another job, and his younger brother was complaining, something about being waked up every time he got in, and he decided to do something about it. Which he did. A few minutes later younger brother was huddled in his bed whimpering, and he sat on his own bed rubbing his sore knuckles.

He sighed. "Just what in hell is your problem, anyway?"

The face rose up, eyes reddened, cheeks wet. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You're so big on doing things for yourself, studying hard, spending time at the library. Hey, you do what you do, and I'll do what I do to get along. We both want out of this town. You just leave me be."

"But it's wrong and you know it," younger brother said, stammering.

"Says who? And what makes you so smart anyway? You think you're so cool, so above it all? You're just a whiny little chicken. Hell, you think you're going to the moon, first time you go up in an airplane, you'll wet yourself"

"I will not!"

"Sure you will. You don't have guts for anything, whether it's talking back to the old man or telling the old lady that I pound on you every now and then. Face it, little brother, you don't have what it takes to do anything."

Now he was sitting up in bed, tears still rolling down those chubby cheeks. "Yes, I do so have it, and I'll prove it to you!"

He laughed, started to get undressed for bed. "That'll be the day."

Mick stood among the metal shapes in the rocket garden, waiting. The sun had risen even higher, heating everything up even more. Large birds—pelicans? buzzards? vultures?—hovered around in the humid air. Around him were the shapes and little plaques, marking the rockets and their missions. Scout. Redstone. Titan. Jupiter. All of them now resting and slightly rusting, some held up by cables. A

couple of boys went racing through, dodging the shapes of the rockets, and he felt like grabbing them by the scruffs of their necks, telling them to be silent in such a holy place. But it probably wouldn't be worth it. The last time he let his temper loose poor ol' Kenny back at the hotel had paid a pretty steep price.

There was a deep growling noise, and then, one after another, buses rolled up by the sidewalk. He joined the crowds of people lining up and he got on, making sure his lapel button was visible. The other passengers were good-natured but a bit solemn, knowing what they were about to witness: six other human beings—friends and family—strapped to the top of one of the most explosive structures in history, to be violently propelled into a place that could kill you within seconds of being exposed without protection.

He sat alone, which suited him, while other people quietly talked about the weather, about scrub scenarios, about missions in the past and missions for the future. A woman escort stood up at the front of the bus and gave a little talk as they made their way back to the highway. She identified herself as a worker at the Cape, described briefly what she did—something to do with the shuttle processing facility—and explained some of the ground rules. Stay in the grandstands. No wandering off. Remember your bus number, and return to the bus immediately after launch. If there is any kind of emergency—she didn't say *Challenger*, but then again,

she didn't have to—also return immediately to the bus.

And all while she talked, he kept his knapsack with his weapons firmly in his lap.

In the bedroom he got dressed, putting on bluejeans, black T-shirt, and black leather jacket. His little brother watched him from behind his little desk, where he was making a model of some damn rocket or something.

"Another night out with the boys?" his brother asked.

"Yep," he said, looking in the mirror, combing back his hair. "That it is."

"And what's it tonight? A gas station? A convenience store? Mugging a couple of college kids from Burlington?"

There. Hair looked great. "Oh, whatever opportunity comes our way."

Younger brother put down his model. "I want to come along."

He started laughing, so loud that he put his hand against his mouth, so that their parents downstairs couldn't hear him. His brother glared at him, saying, "I'm serious. Honest to God, I'm serious."

"Oh please," he said. "What makes you think I'll take you along? Huh? And why do you want to go along anyway?"

His younger brother started putting away some of his modeling tools. "Because I want to prove to myself that I can do it." He rolled his eyes. "I hate to say it, but you were right. I know I can be afraid, really afraid, and if I'm going to learn to fly and get into the air and

go into space, I need to control my fear. I figure if I go along with you and can do that, I really can do anything."

He opened the top drawer of his bureau, reached to the back where he always hid a pack of Marlboros behind a couple of pairs of dress socks. "Okay. If you go along, maybe that helps you in your queer little quest. What's in it for me?"

Younger brother's eyes were young, but they were sharp. "Because maybe I will get scared, so scared that I cry and maybe even wet myself. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Now, that was a point. He turned to his younger brother and said, "Yeah, I would like that. All right. You want in? You're in."

Now he was in the VIP viewing area, set up against the Banana River. To the left was a huge building, a new museum highlighting the Saturn V rocket and the moon missions. Grandstands rose near a fence adjacent to the riverbank, and three flagpoles had been set up. An American flag flapped in the breeze from one, a flag for the shuttle *Columbia* from another, and a NASA flag from the third. Sweat was trickling down the back of his neck and his arms. Jesus, it was hot. He wished he had a hat.

Buses in the parking lot behind the grandstands grumbled, their diesel engines still on, and lines began to form at the stands for souvenirs, ice cream, and water. Mick slowly climbed to the top of one of the grandstands. People were walking up and down taking seats, and

some popped up umbrellas to give themselves a little shade. Loudspeakers announced that it was T-minus three hours and counting, and so far, everything was a go. There were two televisions set up in front of the grandstands, showing the live feed from the NASA channel, but the glare from the morning sun washed out the picture. A digital countdown clock flipped the numerals backwards as the countdown proceeded; he had never seen time move so slowly.

He sat down, put the knapsack down next to him, put his hand inside to touch his weapons. He rummaged around inside for a moment and pulled out a pair of binoculars. He looked across the river, focusing in until he saw the gantry complex. Launch pad 39B. Set up against the gantry was the space shuttle, the orange fuel tank, bright against the slight haze, flanked by the twin solid rocket boosters and the stubby wings of *Columbia*. His throat tightened at seeing it in person, not watching it on CNN or C-SPAN, and as he thought about who was now inside, waiting for launch, he had to turn away for a moment.

Next to him sat two young boys accompanied by their parents. While mom and dad fussed over sunscreen, cameras, and water, one boy said to the other, "I see it! There's the shuttle, *Columbia*!"

The older brother corrected him. "Nate, the whole thing is the space shuttle. *Columbia* is the orbiter. Remember that, okay? If you want people to think you know something about space, you gotta know the right names. Okay?"

"Okay," the boy said, and Mick watched as the two brothers quietly began holding hands as the announcer kept track of the count-down. For a moment he wanted to talk to them, to ask them what it was like, to be two brothers who got along, but this was their day. He didn't want to disturb them.

A convenience store was the target this night, set deep along one of the many rural back roads that connected the small Vermont towns in this part of the county. His buds Harry and Paul had put up a fuss when he'd brought along his younger brother, but he said, "Hey, this is my night, and I say he goes along. You guys got a problem, you can ride with somebody else."

Considering how well things had gone the past few months, Harry and Paul had grumbled some more and had shut their mouths. Except Paul had said, "You're the weirdo who wants to go to the moon, is that right?"

"Yep," his brother said, and Harry and Paul and even he himself had started laughing. He said, "One day maybe the moon, but not to-night. Let's get it on."

He drove by a convenience store called Liar's Paradise and saw one car parked at the side. The clerk's, probably. He made a U-turn farther up the road and came back, parked at the side also. "Harry, Paul, go in and get some stuff. Come back and tell us who's there."

"Kay," they said and left. It was quiet inside the car as he sat behind the steering wheel, his younger brother in the rear seat. His

brother cleared his throat. "How long, do you think?"

"Just a couple of minutes," he said, his mouth growing dry with excitement, the idea that in a very short while he was going inside to steal something from someone, someone he didn't even know.

His brother cleared his throat again. Nervous, wasn't he? He said, "You know, the two of us, we have a lot in common."

"Yeah," he said, tapping the steering wheel with both hands. "Parents who weren't bright enough to move somewhere with better jobs."

"There's something else. We both have drive, that's what. We both want to get out of this town. I want to do it legally, you want to do it illegally. Except for that, we're the same."

"Oh, shut up, will you?" as Harry and Paul came out, laughing. Harry had a beer in his hand, and Paul had a small package. They got into the car, and Harry said, "Piece of cake. Female clerk maybe sixteen or seventeen. That's it."

"Great." He popped open the glove compartment and took out a .38 revolver. "Give me five minutes, then pull up to the front door." After stepping outside he said, "Paul, what the hell do you have there?"

"Something for your brother," Paul said, giggling, tossing over a package of disposable diapers.

More laughter, and then he went into the store. He turned and his brother was right behind him. He wasn't laughing.

Mick took a deep breath as the countdown went into a preplanned

hold. He looked around at the crowd noticing the low conversations, the anxious looks at the gantry and the shuttle a couple of miles away. It was hard to believe that he was actually looking at it, looking at a spaceship. For that's what it was no matter how officious it sounded. The damn thing out there was a spaceship, ready to go, and he was about to see the launch.

If everything went well, of course. He began to pick out faces and such. There. That guy leaning against the fence with the binoculars who wasn't spending much time looking at the launch site. The guy and the gal by the souvenir stand, standing there chatting like they were just there to get some sun, not to see a shuttle launch. And the two guys within a few yards of him in the grandstand who casually looked his way every few minutes. All of them muscled, all of them too casual, and all seeming to share a handicap, for what looked like hearing aids were in their ears.

He shifted the knapsack in his lap, made sure his weapons were within easy reach.

"This is shuttle launch control," came a voice over the loudspeaker, echoing slightly. "The preplanned hold has been lifted. All systems remain go. The count has resumed at T-minus nine minutes and counting. T-minus nine minutes to today's launch of *Columbia*."

People in and around the grandstand applauded and cheered, and after a few seconds Mick found himself joining them.

Inside the store it was just as

Paul and Harry had described. Long rows of chips, canned goods, and other stuff, coolers for beer and drinks, a closed restroom door, and a counter with the girl standing behind it. Younger brother seemed to take a deep breath and stood close, too close, and he said quietly, "Back off, will you? You're crowding me."

His brother went down a row, between chips and soft drinks, and he smiled at the girl. She was in her teens, short red hair and a bright smile that faded quickly when he took the revolver out.

"We'll make this quick and easy, girl, but it's up to you," he said. "Everything in the register. Now."

Immediately she burst into tears, and then she punched open the register drawer and started pulling out bills. "Please—please—" It was like she couldn't finish a sentence. My, how he enjoyed those tears, enjoyed that sense of power going through him, knowing that she would have to do anything and everything he wanted, all because of that hunk of iron in his fist. Without it he was nothing, but with it, for this girl clerk on this night, he was a god.

"Now now," he said, waving the revolver for emphasis. "Under the drawer, too, where you keep the extra bills." She passed the bills to him, and he extended his fingers, just so he could touch her skin, and then—

"Hey!"

He turned, seeing that everything was wrong, everything was wrong, the door to the restroom was open and a large man with a handlebar mustache and one pissed-

off expression on his face had his brother in a headlock with a folding knife to his throat. His brother was gurgling, his face red, and the guy started out, "If you want to see your friend here let loose, then—"

He didn't listen to the rest of the speech. Paul and Harry had pulled up to the door, honked the horn, and he was outside and in the front seat just as they were pulling away. Paul said, "Your brother, man, what's going on—"

And he had said, "Go, damn it! Just get the hell out of here!"

Mick hadn't felt this way in a long time, the sheer energy of the moment, knowing that everybody in this crowd was looking and hoping and praying in one direction, to that gantry and spaceship on the other side of the river. In front of him some people had umbrellas up against the heavy sun; but when the countdown fell below five minutes, they put them away so as not to block the view of their neighbors. He was surprised at how damned considerate they were.

"T-minus two minutes and counting for today's launch of *Columbia*," the echoing voice said. "Everything still a go for launch. Launch control has advised *Columbia* crew to close and lock their helmet visors. T-minus one minute and forty-five seconds."

Then one and then another and then four or five more people stood up as if they were in a giant, open-air cathedral, and Mick joined them. Beside him the two boys were straining up, trying to see over the heads in front of them, and

then they climbed up on the next step of the grandstand. The older of the two had a pair of binoculars in his chubby fists, keeping view of the shuttle, while the other one seemed to be saying the Hail Mary in a faint whisper.

"T-minus one minute and counting."

Mick hung his knapsack from one shoulder while bringing up the binoculars, trying to focus on what was going on, but he found to his dismay that his hands were shaking. Everything he had ever done in his life, and now, now his hands couldn't keep still! He let the binoculars drop around his neck on their strap.

"T-minus thirty-one seconds and counting. *Columbia's* on-board computers now in command as we begin auto-sequence start. T-minus twenty seconds and counting . . ."

And who could have believed, when it all was sorted out, that his brother wouldn't give him up!

No matter the threats, the pleading, the arguments, younger brother had stayed in juvie detention not saying a thing, not saying one word. Only once did he have a chance to speak to him, and his brother's words were to the point: "Guess you think I'm brave now, huh?"

"Jesus, you're an idiot," he said.

"Maybe I am," his younger brother said, his voice calm. "But I'm my own idiot. Maybe I just want to prove that I can do something that scares me so much. Something that I can use later on. Maybe that's why I'm here."

"You think our parents and the

cops are going to believe you? That you were robbing that store with some guys you met on the street? Why haven't you given me up?"

His younger brother shrugged. "Why haven't you told them?"

"I have!" he said. "I've told them that I was there, but that damn store clerk is too scared to testify. And her dad, the guy with the knife at your throat, he didn't get a good look at me. And that's why you're still here, stupid. Why don't you do the smart thing?"

A secret little smile. "I am doing the smart thing. I'm showing you that I can make it, that I'm brave enough to do anything I want. Even if it's being a thief like you."

Mick found he could not breathe as the countdown went on and on, each passing second feeling like another stone added to his shoulders.

"T-minus ten, nine, eight, we have a go for main engine start . . . we have a main engine start . . ."

The crowd about him went "oooh" as the bright flare of red and orange blew out from the bottom of the gantry, and then ". . . three, two, one . . ."

An enormous cloud of steam and smoke billowed out as the solid rocket boosters lit off, and Mick could hardly hear the PA system as the man said: ". . . liftoff, we have a liftoff of space shuttle *Columbia* as she embarks on a nine day mission for space science . . ."

It was like a dream, a dream he had seen in his mind's eye over and over again, as the winged shuttle rose from the pad, rotating as it headed up into the Florida sky. For

a few seconds the ascent was silent as the sound waves rushed at a thousand feet per second to the grandstand. Then the noise struck, rising in a crescendo, a thundering, rippling noise that seemed to beat at his chest and face. For the first second or two the shuttle seemed to climb at an agonizingly slow pace, but then it accelerated, from one heartbeat to the next, rising up and up.

Around him people were yelling, cheering, clapping. Most had binoculars or cameras or camcorders against their faces, but Mick was satisfied to watch it roar up into the sky with his own naked eyes, the exhaust moving out behind the bright engine flare of *Columbia* like a pyramid of smoke and steam.

His cheeks were suddenly wet, and he realized he was crying.

For his younger brother, everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong.

His stay at the juvenile detention center was extended, and then extended again, due to his fights with other detainees. He walked away from a counseling group and spent three days on the outside before being recaptured.

And when he eventually got home, his eyes seemed tired all the time, like he had seen so very much in such a short time. Younger brother had to sleep with a light on, and he had put up a fuss until his brother said quietly, "I'll fight you for it. Trust me, I'll whip your ass."

So the light stayed on, and he had a terrible time sleeping every night, for every time he closed his

eyes, he saw that scene back in the convenience store where he'd abandoned him.

In just a very short while, the shuttle had climbed until all he could make out was the base of the orange fuel tank, and the flames coming from the three main engines and the two solid rocket fuel boosters. Then came a pair of bright flares of light and smoke, and another "oooooh" from the crowd.

The PA announcer calmly said, "Booster control officer confirms normal separation of the boosters. All systems aboard *Columbia* are performing well."

More cheers, as the engine noise finally began to fade away. And then another announcement: "Three minutes and five seconds into the flight, *Columbia* is traveling at thirty-six hundred miles per hour and is seventy-nine miles downrange from the Kennedy Space Center and fifty miles in altitude. All systems continue to perform nominally."

He wiped the tears from his cheeks, kept on staring up, his neck beginning to ache, and he knew he would keep on looking as long as possible.

It began to get even worse. His younger brother had put away his books, had gotten hooked up with some friends he made in the juvenile detention center, and his parents began coming down hard on him, the older brother. One night, his father—never one to do much of anything—got drunk and belted him around the living room. "You

fool!" he shouted. "What the hell did you do? Huh? Bad enough that you have to grow up to be such a loser, you had to take him along for the ride, too? Is that it? Is it?"

So his father had tossed him out of the house, at age seventeen. A year later, after stumbling by on one low-rent job after another, he had joined the military.

By now all he could see was a bright dot of light as *Columbia* surged out across the Atlantic. The PA announcer said, "*Columbia* is now two hundred miles downrange from the Kennedy Space Center and is sixty-seven miles in altitude. All systems still performing well."

He looked down, just for a moment. At the gantry a large cloud of smoke and steam was slowly drifting away. Around him people started leaving the viewing stands, laughing and chattering. He smiled as he saw the two boys, still holding hands, walk away with their parents.

When he looked up again, the dot of light was gone. *Columbia* and her crew were in orbit.

Years later he had met up with his younger brother. The talk had been strained, for whatever little things they'd had in common were now gone. They had both left their small Vermont town, and while he had lived on military bases in the States and Europe, younger brother had gone around the country doing things he would not explain. Though he had a good idea of what was going on, could tell from the hard look about his brother's eyes.

At their very last meeting he had paid their bar bill and said, "Please, can I ask you something?"

"Sure," younger brother said. "Go ahead."

He had stared down at a soggy cocktail napkin, afraid of what he was going to say next. "Will you . . . will you forgive me for what I did, back there?"

His younger brother looked puzzled. "Back where?"

"At the convenience store. When I left you behind . . . I've always felt bad about it, honest. I abandoned you and . . ." He couldn't speak, for his throat felt like it was swelling up so much it could strangle him.

His brother shook his head, picked up a toothpick. "That was a long time ago. I went in that store of my own free will. Forget it, all right? Just forget it."

But he could never do that.

Mick was now sitting alone in the grandstand seats. All the other launch guests had streamed back to the buses, which had grumbled away, heading back to the visitors' center. He sat there alone, the knapsack in his lap. He took a deep breath. It had all worked out. He had had his doubts, but it had all worked out.

Then one man appeared and then another. Joined by a woman and another man. They all had weapons in their hands, and they slowly came up the grandstand, flanking him. He stood up, carefully put his knapsack down, and then kicked it aside. He would no longer need it.

"On your knees and turn around,

now!" one of the men shouted. He did as he was told and felt something light begin to stir in his chest. The long run was over. He had finally seen what he was destined to see. Finally.

The handcuffs were almost a comfort around his wrists. Maybe later he'd tell them about Kenny back at the hotel, but not right now. One of the men leaned into him and said, "The name is Special Agent Blanning, Mick, I've been following your trail for years. For murder and bank jobs and everything in between, across eight states. And you know what? When you said you would give yourself up if you could see a damn shuttle launch in person . . . well, I never would have believed it."

"Glad to make you a believer, Agent Blanning. Sometimes you just get tired of running. And could I ask one more favor to close out the day?"

The FBI agent laughed as they went down the grandstand. "Sure. Why not. You've just made my day."

So he told him. As they led him away, Mick looked back once again at the empty gantry, where all his hopes and dreams had once rested.

So, damn it, this is what it was like! In all those years in the service of his country, in the air force, he'd found an aptitude he never knew existed. He had hit the books while on the government's dime and had actually enjoyed it. The air force was also damn short of pilots. He'd tested out positive for flight training, and from there he kept on climbing that ladder, getting high-

er and higher, from flying regular jets to test piloting to even applying for the astronaut service, can you believe it.

But all the while, as he climbed the ladder, that little weight was on his shoulders, calling him a fraud, calling him a usurper, calling him a thief. And when word came in from the FBI about what his younger brother wanted, well, he thought it would croak any chance of flying into orbit.

But, Jesus, here he was, floating in the shuttle flight deck, his stomach doing flip-flops and his face feeling puffy from adjusting to micro-gravity, and out of one of the aft viewing windows, there was Africa, slowly turning beneath him. There were so many things to do, so many tasks to achieve, and still, he could not believe he was here, that he had made it.

Fraud, the tiny voice whispered. You don't belong here. You stole this. You stole this from your brother.

"Ah, *Columbia*, Houston," came a voice inside his earpiece.

The mission commander, floating about ten feet away, toggled the communication control switch at his side. "Go ahead, Houston."

"Greg, a bit of early housekeeping here. We've got a message for Tom."

He pressed down his own communication switch. "Houston, this is Tom. Go ahead."

"Tom . . . message is that your package has been safely picked up."

He nodded, knowing that his brother was now in custody, now faced trial, and life in prison, all because of what he'd agreed to. He had a flash of anger, thinking that this was his brother's revenge, to spoil this mission and whatever career he had with NASA.

"Ah, Tom . . ."

"Go ahead, Houston."

"Another message, as well. Just one word."

His mission commander was staring at him like he was thinking, what in the world is going on with you and this mission?

"I'm ready, Houston."

The words crackled in his earpiece. "Message follows. Forgiven. That's it, Tom. One word. Forgiven."

"Ah, thanks, Houston. Appreciate that."

"Okay. Greg, we're ready for you to adjust the Ku-band antenna, and we want to check the cargo bay temperatures . . ."

He turned, pretended to look for something in the storage lockers. He knew he would experience many things in this trip to space, from adjusting to the micro-gravity, to assisting in the experiments, to actually seeing how it was to live up here in earth orbit.

But he'd never thought he'd learn that, in space, tears in the eyes have no place to go.

FICTION



Black's Point

Jas. R. Petrin

Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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When Tom Hazlitt finally saw the pale white dish of the radio tower emerge above the trees, he throttled down, briefly glancing in the mirror at the storm of dust he'd raised behind his old pickup along Grindstone Road. Thirteen miles of washboard hadn't done the pain in his belly much good, nor was leaving the city what the doctor had ordered (Doc Keeper cautioning him to stay near the hospital). But Tom was sure in his own mind that he needed this. A week of complete relaxation. No noise; no aggravation; no irritating calls from people wishing to clean his carpets or subject him to a marketing quiz.

He passed Bridge's General Store, closed for the season, and turned off Grindstone at the phone company's microwave tower, the cottagers' only communications link to the outside world. Then he followed the curve of Black's Point Road into the cottage subdivision, the old truck lurching over the pot-holes, and his grip eased on the wheel. He was glad to be here.

It was dry. One of the driest autumns on record. Farther north, forest fires were burning out of control, but here there was tranquility. Overhead the aspens spread their paper-thin yellowing leaves against the sky, and a squadron of pelicans, not beating a wing, drifted above the treetops in a missing-pilot formation.

With the dusty road behind him, Tom could now roll his window all the way down, and he drew in a full breath of sharp, pine-scented air. He ought to have done this

sooner. If he had to be chained to an IV pole, there was no reason to remain chained to the city as well. He had brought along everything he needed: pole, tubing, medications, dressings. A practical nurse until his retirement a year ago, he knew he could look after himself perfectly well.

Black's Point Road followed the hook of the lakeshore, gently curving back on itself, and he drove slowly around the entire loop, curious to see who else might be out here with him at this late time of the year. Vacation had ended, kids were back in their schools. He was beginning to think he had the camp to himself until he passed the Kyte place, near his own cottage, and spotted two vehicles in the yard, a car and a van drawn in tight under the trees.

Oh well. He supposed he could share the great outdoors with a few other folks. He wasn't *that* selfish.

Right now, though, he had to get unpacked and put himself on the drip. The pills had kept the pain bearable during the drive up from the city. Another thing Doc Keeper would berate him for—*You of all people ought to know better than to drive a vehicle under medication!*—but he had kept himself alert by leaving the driver's window open most of the way up from the city, letting the slipstream buffet and flail at him until the dusty road into the park forced him to roll it up again. Still, he knew that the pain lurking down there in his gut was gathering itself for another go at him, and he would need the drip to suppress it.

Tom knew what pain was. Well into his fifties, he'd had his share. Physical pain he understood very well. An old, familiar, if despised, acquaintance that no longer held any surprises for him. He had learnt its secrets. Pain didn't harm you; it was only a messenger, a reminder in terse language that you had something else to fear.

And ordinary pain he could deal with. The plain old bark-your-shin, stub-your-toe kind; even the whack-your-thumb-with-a-fourteen-ounce-hammer variety. But the pain he'd been feeling lately was like nothing he'd ever experienced. Whatever was going on in his stomach simply was not tolerable without the pills and the drip, and the hell of it was, the treatment was just a holding pattern; Doc Keeper wasn't sure what was causing it. *Ulcer, probably. We'll run the tests to make sure. You haven't been spitting up blood, have you? Tom said no. Well, we'll treat it as an ulcer until we know different, so take the medication and don't stray too far from the hospital!*

Sure, doc.

He wasn't blasé about his problem. Far from it. Something was definitely wrong with him, and at his age one was inclined to take such things seriously. Part of you always wondered if this were the big one. The big C. The idea of cancer lurked in the backwaters of his mind like a crocodile waiting to bite him. Still, he was determined to put the best face on it, at least until the results of the tests were known. He could carp and complain as well as anybody, but he was essentially an optimist, able to shunt

an unpleasant issue off to one side for later consideration.

Reaching his own tree-shrouded drive, he pulled into the yard and switched off the ignition. With the engine silenced, the agreeable peace of the forest fell on him. There stood his cottage, his home away from home. The grass was a little shaggy, the flowers needed watering, and there were cobwebs in the many nooks and crannies of the porch and deck, but as always when he arrived here after an absence, he felt as if the place were actively welcoming him. He let that sensation comfort him.

He gave the place the once-over, looking for anything out of the way. No telling what might happen in your absence: a bear in the kitchen, shingles damaged in a storm. As always he glanced up at Old Buster, the name he had given the huge spruce that leaned worrisomely over his roof. Old Buster was a problem. Had been there forever but likely to come down one day right in his lap. He ought to have it removed, but he hated to think of that. The big tree had probably been here for close to a hundred years and its age lent it a dignity that Tom was reluctant to disturb. "But you've got to go!" he grumbled.

Moving slowly, conscious of his stomach, he carried his two small bags into the kitchen—another thing he liked: the cedar and wood-smoke smell that greeted him—set the bags down, and went back out to the truck for his medications and his pole.

It was a typical IV pole; five legs

on casters, a crosstree, hooks to hang the medications from. He'd "borrowed" it from the hospital; one of his friends had smuggled it out to him.

He set up the stand on his screened porch, got the medication out and hung it. Then he went back into the kitchen to get something to eat before settling in with his "rolling placenta" as he called it. *Keep the food bland*, Keeper had warned. Tom popped one of the frozen dinners he'd brought with him into the microwave, barely glancing at it, already knowing that it had to be cream-of-something. What he really wanted was a nice thick steak, but he wasn't keen on provoking any angry responses from his stomach.

It was cream of asparagus, and he ate it at the small table on his porch. It wasn't the "taste delight" claimed on the package, but it was edible. Tom had become quite the connoisseur lately of dinners in the "cream of" category and this wasn't the brand he usually bought, but it had been cheap and, when you were on a pension, price mattered. He pushed the tray aside, reached for the last of his milk, and at that moment he heard the first yell.

He pricked up his ears. It was a man's baritone that had boomed out there in the trees, reverberant, an effect the forest had on voices when no breeze was stirring the leaves.

It wasn't repeated. Tom hadn't caught the words, but the tone suggested there was a man out there who was not in complete control of himself.

For a moment he listened for any further outbreak, wanting to get a bearing on it. But he was sure it must have come from the Kyte place. Not only was there no one else around but it was no secret that the Kytes—Mr. and Mrs.—hadn't been seeing eye to eye for some time. And they were physical about it. Mrs. Kyte sported bruises occasionally, and Tom himself had once witnessed a scene at the beach parking lot. The two had been quarreling by their car. Kyte had angrily gotten into the vehicle, and she had slammed the driver's door on his leg. An ugly event. Some relationships seemed to be built on the understanding that it was okay to knock the bejabbers out of one another.

As for Kyte himself, the few times Tom had spotted the man out on the footpaths or scuffling along the lakeshore with his hands in his raggedy Docker pockets, he had always seemed withdrawn and taciturn, even timid, not the sort of a guy to bellow suddenly like a mad bull.

Then Tom heard the voice again, and this time he was sure that it was coming from the Kyte place. He caught the words "*who the hell cares!*" and "*that's what you say!*"

The altercation depressed him. He resented people dragging their sordid disputes out to this place. Though his opinion might be thought nonsensical by some, he held the view that places like this—serene outdoor places—ought to be as off-limits to small-minded bickering as the interior of a cathedral.

The shadows were lengthening,

evergreens and poplars taking on deeper colors. Only the caps of the tallest trees remained brightened by the declining sun. There was a distant rumbling somewhere off to the south, and in that direction, through breaks in the trees, he could see billowy clouds piling up. He'd heard on the truck radio that the lake country might be in for rough weather tonight, and he was looking forward to it. He enjoyed a storm, liked to watch it gather itself, and would have gone out into the yard for a better view if the pain hadn't been digging vengefully at his innards like the tip of a small dull knife.

With a resigned sigh he downed the last of his milk (God, he missed coffee!), then took his tray and empty cup to the kitchen, rinsed them, and put them away. He poured a glass of ice water, got his book from his bag, shuffled back out to the porch, and sat down in his reclining chair. Then he hooked himself up.

Hooking up, as he called it, had been a simple procedure since his earliest days in nursing. There was an intermittent injection port already installed in his arm, so all he had to do was release the tube from the Zantac, make the connection, and "let 'er drip."

As the light dimmed, he prepared himself for a restful evening, dipping into a paperback (an old space opera he'd picked up at a garage sale), and soon was off in some other galaxy, scarcely cognizant of the passage of time. He was vaguely aware of thunder grumbling, and when he eventually groped for the on-switch of the gooseneck lamp at

his elbow, there was sheet lightning brightly firing the clouds from within. His eyes strayed back to his book.

Before he could resume reading, a door slammed nearby. Not two minutes later feet thudded on his wooden steps, and a young woman barged into the porch. He was so surprised he simply stared at her. Before he could ask what the heck she thought she was doing, she was jabbering at him, trembling and panic-stricken.

"He killed Kerlin!" she cried. "And now he's going to kill me!"

Tom had risen from his chair when the woman entered, and now he awkwardly trundled his pole over to where she stood. She was clearly distressed—stooped, shoulders hunched, hands pressed together—and his professional instincts kicked in. He sat her at the table, poured her some water, and spoke gently to her until she calmed down.

"Now suppose you tell me what you're talking about. *Who's* going to kill you?"

"Bob is! I know it!"

"Well, he's not going to kill you if I have anything to say about it, so maybe you ought to fill me in a bit. Which Bob are you talking about?"

"Bob Kyte," she said as if taken aback at the question.

"I know Kyte. That is, I know who he is. I didn't know his Christian name."

"Christian!" Her voice broke. "Some Christian. He's an animal. A horrible animal."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "Kyte is?"

"He's worse than that!"

"And who are you?" He had never seen her out here in the park before, a thin, rather delicate woman, possibly in her forties, with large terrified eyes and a mane of gray-black hair. With each flicker of lightning her eyes seemed to grow larger.

"I'm Amy Collins. A friend of his wife." Her face contorted as she broke into tears again. "Some friend I am. Poor Kerlin. He's killed her for sure."

"I've met Mr. Kyte. I'm sure he could never do anything like that."

"Do you know him?" she asked. "Do you really know him?" She rushed ahead, answering herself. "No, you couldn't. You didn't even know his first name." She shook her head in despair. "He's an animal."

"You keep saying that. What's he been up to?"

Tom was still finding it difficult to believe that Kyte—the reticent and retiring Kyte *he* knew—could be anything more than, at most, a domestic bully. The Kyte he knew seemed an equable sort most of the time—at least when he wasn't quarreling with his wife—something of a milquetoast specimen, hollow-breasted and pale. Hell, Tom almost felt that he could give Kyte a licking if he had to, and he had a good ten years on the man.

"He's drunk. Lately he's *always* drunk. He gets into these rages, and—"

Before she could complete her sentence, the baritone voice echoed

nearby, prompting a startled cry from Amy and sending her scurrying into the interior of the cottage. As she brushed past, Tom saw that she was limping.

He switched off his reading lamp, dragged his pole over to the screen door, and peered out. It was almost completely dark outside now, the rocks around the fire pit and at the edge of the yard giving off an eldritch glow. A flash of lightning lit the yard like midday for an instant, and he caught a glimpse of someone standing in the driveway at the edge of the trees.

As thunder shivered the cottage, Tom flipped the outside deck light on and watched a figure step out under the threatening bulk of Old Buster. It was a man very different from the slouching figure he had met on his walks along the shore of the lake. Bob Kyte certainly, but with his back ramrod straight, his hands balled into fists, his elbows stiffly bent. He looked as taut as a spring. As he neared the porch, Tom saw a strange and maniacal glitter in his eyes and had an unsettled feeling that this was a guy ready to do something crazy.

Tom casually slid the bolt into place.

"Evening," he said through the screen. "What can I do for you?"

"You know damn well what you can do for me." Kyte spoke with out-of-character boldness, slurring his words, glaring up through the screen door. "You can sen' her majesty out here now so I can settle with her."

"What majesty is that?" Tom replied, trying to sound innocent.

"Don't play dumb! I know she's here. I heard her talkin'."

Tom changed direction.

"Where is your wife?"

"Hellzit to you?"

"It's just that, until I know if your wife is okay, I'm not sending anybody in your direction, my friend."

Kyte's voice was a reptilian hiss. He moved up onto the stoop. "Someone's been blabbing. You *and* her ought to keep your noses out of what don't concern you."

Another flash of lightning lit the yard, a quick stabbing bolt followed by a thunder crash that made the table rattle. Tom jumped, but Kyte didn't flinch. It was as if he had personally arranged the display.

Tom decided he'd had just about enough of his surly neighbor and stepped back from the door.

"Go home, Kyte. We'll sort it out tomorrow. Tonight the lady stays here."

"*Lady?*" Kyte seemed to swell with bug-eyed mockery. The tendons in his neck stood out. "Who are you blathering about? That—that back-stabbing *witch* you got in there?"

He staggered a little, forgot he was on the stoop, and fell flat on his behind in the grass. The impact drove a loud *oof!* out of him, and then a torrent of expletives.

Kyte clawed his way to his feet and launched an unsteady rush back up the steps to the door. Clutching the jamb with both hands he shouted at Tom through the screen, saliva spattering from his lips. "I'm through *talkin'!* Hand her over, Hazlitt! Hand her over *right now!*"

With each accented syllable the drunken sot crashed a booted foot into the door with such force that the wooden frame bounded under each impact.

"Hey, knock that off!" Tom hollered, putting authority into his own voice. "This is private property. Maybe we'll get the police out here to remind you of that."

Kyte stopped his assault on the door but stayed put.

"Go for it. The nearest cops are thirty miles away, and you'll have a heck of a time gettin' ahold of them with the phone lines down, doncha think?"

This information caught Tom off guard. For a moment he wondered whether Kyte had severed his telephone line. But the phone line came in with the power service, a drop that sloped in from a pole near the road, and Tom had not witnessed any act of sabotage. Nor was it likely, the guy being as drunk as he was.

On the other hand there was this gathering storm. Electrical storms knocked the power out regularly here, so often, in fact, that people had come to expect it, accustomed to resetting the flashing displays of their clock radios and VCR's. And if the power could go, why not the phones?

"Go home, Kyte," he said again. And turning his back disdainfully, he rolled his IV pole to the sliding door that separated the porch from the inner rooms of the cottage.

As if he had only just noticed Tom's pole, Kyte shouted after him, "Hey, what's with you? Are you some kinda invalid? Yeah. In-*valid*,

is what you are. Better watch someone don't yank your life support." And with a mirthless cackle he left the step and clumped away into the shadows, dragging his boots through the grass with stiff-legged sweeps.

Behind him the woman said, "He *has* done something to Kerlin! He wouldn't have left her alone all this time unless she was..." She couldn't finish.

Kyte had been truthful about one thing: the line was dead—all right. If it hadn't been, Tom's intention was to call the police detachment in Riverton and request that a patrol car be sent out on the double. Now it seemed he would have to wait. But he was sure the trouble would be corrected soon, and he could make the call then.

He sat with the woman over hot tea—the heck with his diet; they were getting to know one another.

"So how did the three of you wind up here at the lake together?"

"We came first. That is, Kerlin and I did. *He* wasn't even invited."

What Kyte had come up here to tell them, Amy explained, was that the planned divorce—his and Kerlin's—was a great misunderstanding. So was his problem with Amy. Both girls, as he put it, were "over-reacting." If they'd just hear him out, they'd understand where he was coming from, and they could sort things out to their "mutual satisfaction."

She shuddered. "You should have heard him. He was like a snake oil salesman."

Tom's stomach felt numb and sore. He had disconnected the IV. He would hold off as long as he could before taking any more medication.

"What's the matter with your leg," he asked. "Why are you limping?"

She shrugged. "I—I slipped, rushing out of Kerlin's place. Fell down the steps on my way out." Then she turned the question around with a curious glance at the IV pole, "And what's the matter with *you*?"

"I don't know. They think it might be an ulcer. Or maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

He shrugged.

"You think it's something more serious, don't you?"

"Not necessarily." Tom didn't want to get into it. "Now, let me see if I've got this straight. Kyte dated you after he left Kerlin?"

"Yes. I mean, no. That is, he hadn't actually left her yet, but I didn't know it at the time. I believed him when he said he was available. It was only when Kerlin reproached me about it one day that I realized he had been lying to me." She gave a melancholy laugh. "Now I can't believe I was interested in him. The only good that came out of it is that Kerlin and I became friends. That's why she invited me out here. We thought we'd play cards the whole time and swap horror stories about him." She shivered. "Then, a *real* horror story! He showed up at the door."

"And you let him in?"

She nodded, shifting her leg with a wince of pain.

"Maybe you'd better let me look at that."

"It's okay. Just a sprain or something."

"Still . . ."

She sat with her eyes forced shut while he examined her leg. When he pressed with his thumbs just above the ankle, she winced and pulled away.

"I don't think it's broken," Tom said, "but I'm sure it's sprained." He brought out his Tylenol 3 pills and offered them to her. "Take a couple of these painkillers if you like. They'll help."

"Are you a doctor?" she asked suspiciously.

"No, but I am—I *was*—a nurse."

"That's weird. I mean I guess it isn't really, but you always think of nurses as being female."

"Well, now I'm retired."

She took the pills reluctantly. "And what's that?" she asked, indicating the drip.

"Zantac."

She squinted at the bag. "It says ranitidine."

"Same difference." He winked. "You can try the drip if you like."

"Ugh. I'll stick to the pills."

"You were saying the two of you let Kyte into the cottage. Bad decision."

"Sure. But who knew?"

Once Kyte was inside, Amy continued, he asked for a drink. "He already looked half in the bag—he'd probably stopped in Gimli or River-ton to stoke up. So Kerlin said no. But after a few minutes he got one for himself. He was in mid-sentence when he did that. It seemed as natural as anything. That's when I re-

alized we should have fixed him the damn drink—a weak one—because he brought the whole bottle back from the cabinet and drank from it in big gulps."

She said that the couple then started arguing. They got louder and louder, calling one another the most horrible names. Then he told her he was going back to the city and that he was taking Amy with him. "I think I said something like, 'Excuse me, don't I have any say in this?' And Kerlin said to him . . . she said . . ." Here Amy's recitation faltered, remembering her friend's words. "She said, 'Over my dead body!'"

Amy's eyes filled with tears. She rattled two of the pills out onto the tabletop, popped them into her mouth, and swallowed them. Hazlitt patted her arm comfortingly, got up, and stepped out into the porch.

Staring at the island of light thrown across the lawn from the windows, he spoke quietly; her answers floated back to him through the open doorway.

"What happened then?"

"He jumped at her. He grabbed her wrists, and—I don't know what he did after that. Kerlin shouted at me to get away and I did."

He almost didn't want to say it.

"And you think he's killed her?" It seemed a long stretch.

"I've been trying to tell myself that she's okay. That it's not the first time they've had these fights, so—" She broke off and lowered her head. "But no. I don't think she's okay."

Lightning flooded the yard, lin-

gered, flickered extensively. It revealed nothing except the truck, the birdfeeder, the pump house, and the ominous profile of Old Buster.

He wondered how much longer the light show would continue without any rain pelting down on the roof; it was eerie to have so much lightning and no precipitation. Thunder followed the flash, beginning with a crisp, thin crackle, then a long, spiraling, crunching sound that rumbled down the sky. A wind came up, tossing the trees around.

There was nothing that could be done about Kyte tonight.

If he were a younger man, or at least not hobbled by this damned affliction, he might stalk over to the Kyte place and demand to know what was going on. But he wasn't younger, and he was in pain, and there was nothing he could do to change anything and they had to face the fact.

As if reading his mind, Amy said, "I'm probably wrong. She's probably all right."

"Probably," Tom agreed.

And yet he wondered. That was one angry cottager out there. A man incensed. A deep and concentrated malevolence seemed to be seething inside him.

Then a sharp tinkling sound interrupted Tom's thoughts. It came from the back of the house.

"What the devil—"

Tom walked back through the great room to the center hall. There were four bedrooms back there, and a bathroom. He heard the clatter of a small object rattle off the side of

the house. That lunatic Kyte was throwing stones at the cottage!

Tom's first impulse was to get raging mad at the idiot. But a knee-jerk response would be counter-productive here. Amy crept up close, and he took her hand and squeezed it.

"I have insurance," he said, realizing the feeble inadequacy of the response.

"I told you," she whispered. "He's an animal!"

"Well, animal or not, we won't make it easy for him. Let's kill the lights."

They switched everything off, leaving only a tiny nightlight burning near the floor in the hallway. It cast a dim, pallid glow. They stood in its feeble glimmer listening to Kyte work his way purposefully around the place, cursing insanely, his stones sometimes breaking windows and sometimes not. Tom did have insurance on the place, as a matter of fact, but didn't know if the policy protected him against lunatics; madness was an act of God.

Eventually the assault ended. They heard Kyte move off. Tom went bitterly from room to room inspecting the damage and found that practically every pane of the aluminum sliders in the back rooms had been cracked or broken. The big windows in the great room had fared better, starred in places but not completely shattered.

Amy said, her voice still trembling, "At least we won't be needing this."

She was pointing to the can of bug spray Tom kept in a corner of the kitchen. She was right. This

late in the season there weren't a lot of bugs to enter through the damaged panes and share the premises with them.

"Listen," said Tom when they had switched the lights off again, "I was thinking before this last bit that we'd wait until morning and, if the phone was still out, drive into Riverton and report this guy. Now I'm having second thoughts. The man's a maniac. God knows what he'll try next. And there's Mrs. Kyte to think about. So maybe we ought to leave now. We can stop at the tower and try the pay phone there on the off chance that it's only my phone that's out. Maybe the nut actually did cut my line somehow. If the pay phone doesn't work, we'll drive all the way in to Riverton. Are you up for that?"

He wasn't sure he was up for it himself. He didn't look forward to driving all the way into town with his stomach feeling as it did. And he was exhausted, numbed by the medication. He had planned to be in bed by now.

Tom studied Amy's face, ghostly pale in the glow of the nightlight. She gave her assent with a reluctant nod of her head.

"Good," he told her. "But you're going to have to do the driving. If you think you can manage it, that is."

She nodded again.

"Fine. Why don't you slip out and start the truck while I get my stuff together." He remembered her injury. "How is your leg doing?"

"I'm okay."

"Good. The key's in the ignition." As she started for the door, he add-

ed, "And make sure you lock yourself in the cab while you're waiting."

He had barely started to gather his things when he heard her uneven step on the porch and her voice calling to him.

"Are you *sure* you left the key in the ignition?"

"Of course. Why?"

"There's no key in the truck at all. Not on the dashboard, not under the seat—nowhere."

Tom made a fruitless search of his pockets, shook his head, confused.

"He got to it, didn't he?" Amy said matter-of-factly.

Tom shrugged, chiding himself for not anticipating this. He always left the key in the vehicle here at the cottage.

Amy was biting her lip.

"Can't you—you know—jump the ignition or something?" He shook his head. It had been so long since Tom had hot-wired a vehicle that he wasn't sure he could do it even with a set of instructions. Reading his expression she said, "Then it looks like we're stuck here."

"I'm afraid so."

The spirit seemed to go out of her. She picked the phone up, listened for a dial tone, set it down again. She slumped against the wall, gradually let her weight pull her down, folding her knees until she was sitting on the floor. He got creakily down on the floor beside her and consulted his watch. "Look, it's already one A.M. I'm sure the phone will working again by morning. I mean, it's *got* to be. And it's

bound to start raining soon, which will drive Kyte indoors. We'll wait him out. I'm sure we can do it."

"Yes," she said without confidence. "I'm sure we can."

She was silent a minute. Then ...

"There is one thing," she said.

"And what's that?"

"I don't like to mention it. I'm superstitious—talk a thing into happening, my grandmother used to say. But it just occurred to me. He could burn the place down, couldn't he? With us in it?"

It was a chilling thought. They sat there on the floor together nursing private opinions about the possibilities, while out in the great room lightning shot capering shadows against the walls and the thunder boomed.

It was two twenty-five by Tom's watch when Good Neighbor Bob started in again.

Something awakened them—they had been drifting in and out of sleep. A sound brought Tom quickly to his feet—a little too quickly, he immediately realized as a spike of pain shot through his midsection. But he ignored the discomfort. There was a more pressing concern.

Kyte was rattling around out there in the darkness and not caring who knew it. Tom lifted the phone receiver to check for the dial tone (there was none), then moved cautiously out onto the screened porch to try to figure out what the nutcase was up to.

The clouds were socked in solid, and he couldn't see anything. He debated whether or not to switch on

the deck light and decided against it: Kyte hadn't thought of smashing the bulb yet. All Tom could do was listen, by which he determined that Kyte was somewhere off to the left, the idiot stumbling around, knocking into things, and cussing. There was an unmistakable clink of beer bottles as though he were manhandling a heavy cooler.

Amy appeared at Tom's shoulder. "It sounds as if he hasn't finished with us yet. And as if he's going to get even drunker."

"That last part is fine," Tom muttered. "Maybe he'll drink himself into oblivion."

Which would be wonderful, of course. Except that, between his present state of malevolence and the hoped-for unconsciousness, Kyte would be capable of some pretty terrible deeds. To expect more alcohol to have a positive effect on him was plain silly.

Lightning brightened the yard long enough to give Tom a fix on Kyte: he was at the treeline, hunched over, busy with something.

"What's he up to?" Amy asked.

"Who can tell. We'll find out." A disquieting thought stirred in Tom. "Do you know if the Kytes keep any firearms at their place?" He had an uneasy feeling that stones might not be the only projectiles Kyte would send in their direction.

Amy replied that she didn't think so. "I don't remember seeing any. And I don't see Bob as an outdoorsman."

Tom was relieved to hear it. Still, if Bob Kyte wanted to arm himself he wouldn't have much trouble do-

ing it. Plenty of cottage owners here kept guns. Kyte only had to break into a few places and take what he wanted.

Amy's thoughts tracked with his. "If he does come up with a gun, then we're going to need something to defend ourselves with. Don't you have one?"

"No."

She pointed. "What do you call that?"

At her prompting Tom realized that he did in fact possess a weapon of sorts: an old scarred relic of a scattergun, dusty and decorative, propped on a rack above the fireplace. He had come to think of it as part of the furnishings.

The question then was, did he have any shells for it? And even more important, would the damn thing function properly, or was it more likely to blow up in Tom's face?

He rummaged around until he found a half dozen twelve-gauge shells moldering in a drawer that was a catch-all for tools, fuses, and various other knickknacks. A price sticker on the box showed them to be almost twenty years old. Which was fine, he thought wryly. What could be better for an ancient gun than ancient shells?

He popped one of the shells into the chamber of the gun and closed the breech, fully appreciating that what he now held in his hands might be the equivalent of a shrapnel grenade.

He was shoving the drawer shut when he heard Amy cry out. He hustled back up the hall to the kitchen, where the glow of the

nightlight threw an eerie pallor across the room. Kyte was at the kitchen window. Somehow he had clambered up six feet off the ground and was peering through the broken pane.

Before Tom could react, Amy, quick as a cat, snatched the bug spray aerosol off the top of the fridge and gave Kyte a blast of it full in the face. Kyte screamed and disappeared. Reaching the window, Tom spotted a shape scuttle into the foliage like some overgrown fiddler crab, and with his heart thudding he aimed the shotgun at it and pulled the trigger.

The gun made a dull click, nothing more.

Amy gripped his arm. "He tried to grab me! Couldn't you get him?"

"It didn't work. The damn thing didn't work."

Tom peered at the old scattergun ruefully.

"I only wanted to scare him, but the damn thing wouldn't work!" He remembered the bug spray. "But you certainly nailed him, kid." He took the can from her hand and read the label aloud. "For crawling insects—now *that's* appropriate!"

"What'll it do to him, do you think?" Steady as a rock when she had acted, she was visibly shaken now.

"I don't really know. I guess that depends. Looks like the window frame might have taken the brunt of it." He poked his finger at a large dribble of the noxious stuff that was pooling at the bottom of the casement.

She was disappointed. "Sorry. I'm really sorry. I tried my best—"

"You did great. You gave him something to think about."

"But if I had aimed better . . ."

"All we want to do is keep him at bay until morning arrives. If the jerk has any sense, he'll have learned something—to keep his distance."

He hefted the gun wearily. "All the same, I'd better see if I can get old Betsy working. Probably just needs to be cleaned."

She sat down on the woodbox to ease her swollen ankle. She still had the painkillers with her, and she took another.

"Are you there, Hazlitt?"

The suddenness of the voice startled them, coming out of the clearing only a few yards from the house.

Tom stepped out onto the porch. Where *was* the guy?

"What do you want, Kyte?"

"We need to talk. Have us a pow-wow."

Tom glanced back at Amy. He said, "Fine, let's do that. Show yourself."

He was about to switch on the deck light when the clouds parted, letting the starlight through. Kyte emerged from behind the pump enclosure where he had been crouching. Tom saw with a new twinge of concern that he had scrounged a hunting bow from someplace and wore it slung around his shoulders. He approached and stopped ten feet away, grinning. He touched the peak of his cap when he saw Amy looking out from the great room.

"You almost got me with that bug spray, hon. Good thing I let go in time. I could of been blinded."

"I wish you *had* been blinded," Amy shot at him.

"Oh, nice. A fine way to talk. Anyway, Hazlitt, it's you I want to have words with. I brought an offer. Here's the deal. Send the lady out and I won't burn down the cottage."

Tom heard Amy whisper, "I knew it!"

Kyte waited for Tom's reply with the lopsided grin still on his face, and Tom gave his answer with a confidence he didn't feel.

"You won't try that."

"No? And why not?"

"Because there's a good chance you'd get burnt up, too. The forest is tinder dry, we're on a peninsula, and there's only one road out. Even if you did manage to drive off in time, you'd meet the authorities coming the other way. A fire would be seen for miles, and there'd be forestry and police vehicles tearing up here to investigate. They'd take an interest in anybody rushing away."

Kyte chuckled.

"Well, maybe you're right. But it's an option, and I'll consider it. In the meantime I got something else lined up."

He sidled closer, his sneaky grin hardening until it only turned up at the corners.

"Here's a question, Hazlitt. Sort of a riddle. Tell me if you've heard it."

He cleared his throat noisily and said, "When a tree falls in the forest, does anybody hear?" Then he jerked his head meaningfully in the direction of Old Buster.

"What?" said Hazlitt, although with an unpleasant impression

that he knew exactly what Kyte was talking about.

"When a tree falls in the for—"

"I heard you. But it makes no difference. Nobody's joining you and that's it."

"Okay," returned Kyte sweetly, "have it your way. But we'll see if you don't change your mind." He turned away, hesitated, and, before Tom saw what he was up to, he had fitted an arrow to his bow, wheeled about, and shot it at them.

It banged into the crosspiece of the wooden screen door, partly penetrated the half-inch cross-member, and hung there quivering. "That's to remind you both not to try running away." He patted the bow. "This'll put an arrow into you that'll come right out your other end."

He ambled into the shadows then, sniggering.

Amy tugged at Hazlitt's arm. "He tried to shoot us!"

"I don't think so. It was just a shot. I don't think he can see us clearly through the screen in this light."

"What's he talking about? What's he going to do?"

The very next moment she had her answer: the chunky thump of an axe biting into wood.

"My god! He is going to set fire to us. He's cutting firewood, he's—"

"No," Tom said. "I think he really does have something else in mind for us."

He took a deep breath. "I believe he's going to try and drop a tree on top of us."

"What are you saying? You're not serious!"

"I'm quite serious. And so is he. See that big tree out in the front yard? The one leaning over the cottage? I think he's going to try to bring it down on us. Which wouldn't be too difficult, it's ready to fall, he's only got to encourage it." He gave a resigned sigh. "Thirteen years I've owned the place and thirteen years I've been waiting for Old Buster to fall on me."

"So, why haven't you done something by now? Cut it down?"

"I could never bring myself to do it. I guess maybe I identify with Old Buster."

The wind drove the cloud cover aside again, bringing thin starlight that revealed Kyte wielding an axe with the hell-bent energy of a madman, sweeping the blade back at hip level, then driving it forcefully at the trunk of the tree.

Amy scrambled away, came back with the gun, and shoved it into Tom's hands.

"Shoot him! For God's sake, shoot him!"

"But the gun doesn't work, remember? And even if it did—"

"What? Are you telling me you wouldn't do it? That you won't protect yourself? Protect *us*?"

She stared at him uncomprehendingly.

Tom didn't answer. For starters, he wasn't sure Kyte could make good on his threat. It was a biggish old tree, and Kyte was no Paul Bunyan. But fundamentally Amy was asking whether or not he could bring himself to kill Bob Kyte. It was a tough question. He had spent a lifetime helping people, considered himself a kind person, sym-

pathetic. On the other hand he was no bleeding heart. He knew that people could be inherently evil—bad to the bone, as the expression went—and he thought such people forfeited their right to considerate treatment.

But it was all academic. The gun didn't work.

Out in the yard Kyte snarled something unintelligible. The blade of the axe had lodged in the tree, and he was having a problem yanking it out.

"Maybe his axe is too dull," Amy said hopefully.

"Just the opposite. It's too sharp. An axe has to be blunted a bit, otherwise—well, you can see what happens."

Any other time Tom might have chuckled at the poor dope's struggle, the almost comic, ineffectual attempts to lever the axhead out of the tree, but a voice inside him said, Sure, Tom, laugh it up. That "poor dope" wants to commit a double murder in which you play a prominent role, and the way things are looking, he just might pull it off.

With one heroic yank Kyte popped the blade out of the tree trunk and flung the implement aside in disgust. He strode away and was back in a minute with a different tool. A saw. Tom was relieved that it wasn't a chain saw but perceived that it was something almost as good. A bow saw. What some folks in the area called a Swede saw. The ultimate non-power tool for the cutting down of trees. Teeth on it a half an inch long.

As if to proclaim Kyte's new assault on the tree, there was a bright flash of lightning followed instantly by thunder.

"This is like a scene from a horror movie," Amy wailed. "We can't stay here."

But they couldn't leave, either. There was no back door. The hunting bow of Kyte's was a murderous looking thing, with pulleys and levers and a thick, strong cord. And though his marksmanship might be in doubt, his boast that it could put an arrow right through a person was borne out by its penetration of the door.

"Why is he doing this? Why can't he just let it go?" Amy wailed.

"He's a man with a mission," Tom said, though perplexed himself. "Or he's schizophrenic."

"He's a rat."

"I won't contradict you."

They watched Kyte getting the saw blade started in the trunk of the tree.

"There's still a way out of this mess," Tom said. "We're on a lake. We need a boat."

"Have you got one?"

"No."

"Then . . ."

"There's a spot near the beach where people keep small boats—pull them up on shore, tie them to a tree to keep them handy for next time. We could borrow one and get to Riverton by water." Or they could cross to Hecla Island, he was thinking, but that was a large chunk of water for a small boat, especially with the weather about ready to dump on them. "I could go and look. See what's there. If I find some-

thing, I could come back and get you."

"You'd leave me here?"

"You'll be safe enough for the next few minutes. He's got his work cut out for him, tackling that tree."

"You said it was practically ready to fall."

"I meant that it's leaning in the right direction. He's still got to hack through it, and that's a very tough job."

"I'd rather come with you."

"On that leg?"

There was no way to tell how badly her leg was hurt. The bone might be cracked. In any case, it wasn't a limb that one ought to go hiking down to the lake on. If he got them a boat, he'd make a support for her—rig a crutch or a cane or something, but this first trek down to the water he was going to have to make on his own. Trouble was, the pain in his stomach was back. Could he manage without seeing flashes in front of his eyes or, even worse, passing out on his feet?

Amy was upset with him, not saying anything more.

"I *will* come back," he assured her. "You have to believe me."

"I'll try." It was a small, hollow voice. "But you'd better be quick."

"Don't worry. Only ten minutes at the most. And he won't even know I'm gone."

"How will you get out of here without his seeing you?"

"I'll slip out a window."

He got out through one of the back bedroom windows by pulling the broken sliders out of the frame, climbing onto a chair, and going out

feet-first. The last he saw of Amy was her pale frightened face staring out from the dark of the room.

He moved quickly through the brush to the back of the lot, then struck out for the beach along the drainage ditch that threaded its way through the trees and brush behind the cottages. Mosquitoes whined in his ears. When he came abreast of the Kyte place, he hesitated. He ought to have a look. Check up on Mrs. Kyte. Amy would want to know.

He left the ditch and climbed the slope toward the cottage. While he was still under cover of the trees, he stopped. He didn't have to go any farther. He could see Mrs. Kyte from here. She had been attempting to escape in the van. The door of the vehicle was open, and her body was dragged partway out of it, her head and shoulders on the ground. Even at this distance Tom could see the blood, and he shivered.

The ditch meandered downhill towards the shoreline, but where it fed into a culvert under Black's Point Road, he took a more direct path, crossing the road and cutting through a clearing of picnic tables for the beach.

The ache in his stomach seemed to be spreading, sending out spikes of pain, radiating in dull throbs. He stumbled across the little footbridge that spanned the creek, then plodded over grass-tufted sand to the beach. The sky was big here, patchy with stars, and the water was rough. Wild looking, long, heavy cloudbanks were driving up from the south. Was it going to rain or not?

The beach was small, a hundred yards long at most. At the far end where the sand petered out and the shore became stony and pebble-strewn, he could see the rounded hulls of a couple of small boats gleaming under the trees. Teeth clenched against his pain, he trudged toward them.

When he arrived at the boats, he slumped down on the sand. He was too disappointed to stay on his feet. There were indeed two small craft tied up here, a canoe and a catamaran pulled high up on the slope and secured with polypropylene ropes.

Kyte—it could only have been Kyte—had got here ahead of him and knocked the keels out of both of them.

Tom suppressed a wave of hopelessness. He was lightheaded, exhausted, starting to lose his self-control. He saw a rock and sat down on it, misjudged the drop, and was rewarded with a bolt of pain through his hip. Easy, you old croc, he told himself, you'll make matters worse! But could matters be any worse? Oh, certainly. They were still alive, weren't they?

A new concern for Amy's well-being shot through him. He got to his feet. He had to get back. It had been a mistake leaving her alone. This entire effort had been a mistake. As for continuing his search for a boat, it would take much too long to look for a boat among the lakefront cottages. With his hand pressed to his side he started back.

A cold dread drove him now. Something awful could have happened. He had misjudged the time.

He had been absent fifteen minutes, and there was no telling what Kyte might have accomplished by now. His concern overrode his pain.

As he neared the cottage, he was relieved to hear old Bob still beaver-ing away, the blade of his saw going *vert, vert, vert* . . . The guy's energy was incredible. But then, alcohol was a fuel.

Tom left the drainage ditch and hurried up the slope, keeping to the trees. At the woodpile he stopped and looked up at the window he had slipped out of. It looked awfully high from this perspective. Climbing out had been one thing; getting back in was going to be . . .

"Tom!"

He turned in surprise at Amy's whisper. She took his hand and pulled him into the trees with her.

"Were there—"

"Boats? Yes. But all damaged. He must have got to them. I—uh—stopped and looked in at the Kyte place." He swallowed. "Mrs. Kyte is dead."

She shook her head in denial, and tears started to her eyes. He quickly changed the subject.

"But look, what are you doing out here?"

She was weeping. "I couldn't stay inside any longer. I heard some loud cracking and popping, and I thought the tree was about to fall on me."

"Your limp seems worse than before."

"I put my foot wrong when I dropped to the ground."

As she said this, the big spruce let out another very loud *crack!* Kyte stopped sawing, stood back from

the tree, and stared up at it as if estimating the work he had left to do. Then he sauntered lazily toward the cottage.

"All right, Hazlitt, she's getting close. I'm giving you one more chance. If you don't cooperate—boom!—down she comes."

The little man squinted suspiciously up at the cottage with his head canted to one side; the bow saw, an arc of orange-painted enamel, trailed from his right hand.

"Hazlitt? You in there, Hazlitt?"

Kyte saw his axe on the ground, picked it up, and discarded the bow saw. He moved toward the cottage steps.

"Hazlitt?"

The cottage was silent.

Kyte, mumbling expletives, walked suspiciously all around the cottage, and reaching the window they had escaped out of, he stopped and took a good look at it. He looked at the broken framing cast to one side. Something clicked. He went quickly back around to the front, shouldered the flimsy porch door open, and strode boldly through the porch and into the cottage.

It was their chance to run, to get away from here. But how far could they get with Amy crippled as she was? "If he comes out here after us," Tom told her, "be real quiet."

"I hadn't planned on singing the national anthem," Amy returned irritably.

But he knew that Kyte would quickly eliminate all possible hiding places inside the cottage—there weren't many of them. He would check under the beds and behind the couches, and, if he thought of it,

poke his head up into the dusty, insulation-crammed attic. He would then come outside. He'd know they couldn't be too far away—a guy on an IV and a lame woman—and would start beating the bushes for them like a hunter flushing out game.

Tom risked a glance, lifting his head up over a moss-clotted stump. He could see the cottage very clearly, its windows lighting up as Kyte moved from room to room turning on the lights. They could hear him yanking furniture out from the walls. Something—maybe a lamp—fell over with a dull clatter.

And then all hell broke loose inside.

Suddenly realizing that they had slipped from his grasp, Kyte began stomping around in frustration, breaking everything he could swing his axe at.

"He's wrecking your place," Amy cried, "and it's all my fault!"

"No," Tom corrected her. "It's all *his* fault."

They heard an especially harsh curse, followed by a shrill, indignant complaint.

"Hey! They were gonna shoot me! Shoot me! Can you believe it?"

They could see him through the window. He had found the shotgun, which Tom had shoved between the wall and the fridge, and was holding it up, staring at it in disbelief.

"Okay," he said bitterly, "we'll see who shoots who! Now where would I hide if I were a cripple and an invalid? I believe I might crawl behind the woodpile, yes, sir!"

"Great," said Tom, heart sinking. But Amy was tugging urgently at

his sleeve and pointing. Following her frightened gaze, Tom saw another threat, one that made the back of his neck tingle. Old Buster was finally on the move. Not popping or creaking or making a lot of noise about it but clearly leaning ever more sharply toward the house.

Indoors, Kyte was oblivious, breaking open the gun and inspecting the breech.

"Got ammo? Yep!"

The tree was edging through the air with agonizing slowness but visibly. Amy was gripping Tom's wrist so hard her nails were digging into his flesh. "Yes!" she breathed in a tiny, shrill voice, "fall on him, squish him like a bug!" Tom himself was experiencing a violent clash of emotions. If someone were going to get squished tonight, he couldn't think of anyone who deserved it more than Kyte. But this was Tom's cottage. He loved the place. To see it smashed into kindling was awful to contemplate.

But what he thought about it didn't matter. If Buster were coming down, then that's all there was to it. All Tom could do was watch.

Then, a miracle. The big spruce slowed its juggernaut advance. It stopped, heaved back a short way, then hung motionless above the cottage like some Damoclean nightmare, a behemoth supported by one crooked, straining arm of a poplar and a taut electrical service cable that whined under the strain.

"No!" cried Amy, "no!"

Unaware of the drama, Kyte sauntered out of the cottage with the old shotgun nestled in the crook

of his arm. His smug grin was back. He looked as tickled as a kid with a new water pistol. He glanced behind the woodpile, then proceeded directly toward them and drew the branches apart with the barrel end of the gun.

His face lit up. "Hi, folks. Welcome to the show."

He leveled the gun at them.

But at that moment there was a loud *ping!* above their heads. It echoed as if it had been passed through a reverberation chamber. It was followed by a couple more such noises in quick succession—*ping-PANG!* And then the tree came down.

As the electrical wires parted, the lights in the cottage winked out. The tree plummeted to earth in an express-train rush. Redirected by the branch of the poplar, it narrowly missed the cottage, branches skittering down the outside wall, and fell directly on top of Kyte. Tom, who had flung his arm over Amy in a hopeless defense against the shotgun, saw Kyte disappear. One moment the man was standing there in the thin dawn light, and the next moment the spot where he had been standing was a seething forest of spruce needles and churning branches.

Tom and Amy remained on the ground, bewildered.

"My God," breathed Amy, "it did squish him, it did, it—"

The words died in her throat as the branches parted and a grinning face peered out. Kyte said happily, "Phew, that was close."

Incredibly he had not even been knocked off his feet. The great

trunk and boughs of the tree had somehow missed him, crashed down all around him while accommodating his frail body in a branchless gap. Unscathed, Kyte stepped out of the still-writhing boughs with the shotgun firmly gripped in his hands.

"It must be my lucky day. Can't say the same for you folks, though. It's not your lucky day at all." Again he pointed the gun.

There was no time for disappointment or to marvel over the turn of events. There was only time to react. Instinctively Tom rolled sideways, drawing Amy against him and twisting his thin body to shield her. At the same moment Kyte pulled the trigger. This time the gun went off. It made an incredible roar. At point-blank range, Kyte could not miss, and facedown in the leaves with Amy, Tom heard the blast and knew that they must have been hit. But he felt nothing. He wondered if it were the effect trauma patients had described to him—if he had been anesthetized by the high levels of adrenaline, epinephrine in his blood.

Of course he would die all the same.

But he did not die. He lay where he was for several more moments realizing as the seconds ticked by that by now he ought to be feeling something—anything. He cautiously rolled off of Amy and sat up. No Kyte. The man had pulled his vanishing act again. Then, in the rising gray light, Tom located his unpleasant neighbor. Kyte appeared to have been struck by a fist, punched straight backwards. He

lay sprawled among the spruce tree's great bushy boughs with his arms spread wide as though welcoming heaven. The shotgun lay across his chest, a piece of junk, its shattered breach still hot and smoking.

There was a gentle and growing sound in the leaves around them, and Tom realized it was finally raining. A warm patter of scattered drops. The wind had subsided, there was a dead calm, and there was no thunder or lightning at all.

"It's an ulcer all right," Doc Keeper pronounced. Even over the pay phone his professional certainty came through, and Tom could imagine him striking the lab report with the back of his hand. "Ugly but operable. I phoned your home twice last evening to tell you, but all I got was your answering machine. Don't you check for messages?" His voice hardened. "I did caution you to stay near the hospital."

Tom held the phone tight to his ear and gazed up at the tower. The rain had come and gone, the sky had cleared, it was going to be a beautiful fall day.

"Guess I wasn't listening," he said. "Why have I got an ulcer?"

"Any number of reasons. Maybe you're worrying too much. You shouldn't do that. You're retired, for crying out loud. What have you got to worry about?"

Good question.

"That's why I'm here," Tom explained. "I came out to the lake to relax a little. But listen, I'm calling

from a pay phone, and I'm out of coins. I'd appreciate it if you'd do a small favor for me."

The doc replied guardedly, "You know I'm very busy, Tom. What—"

"There's this huge tree that fell and almost squashed my cottage—actually it missed the cottage and fell on my neighbor. It didn't squash him, though—he shot himself. Just as well because I think he killed his wife. And there's a woman here with a fractured leg. So can you phone the Riverton police for me and have them send a car out here? Block C-27, lot 99. Tell them that it's the cottage with all the windows smashed out, the only one with an arrow stuck in the door."

He listened a moment to the hollow silence and then gently hung up the receiver.

"Are you hungry?" he asked Amy. "Hungry?"

She gave him a weak smile.

"Famished is more like it."

"Well, I can offer you cream of asparagus, cream of potato, or cream of broccoli. Or I could whip us up two plates heaped with bacon and eggs, whacks of toast, steaming hot coffee . . ."

"What about the pain in your stomach?"

"I'm ignoring it."

She giggled.

"Well, gee, that's a tough one. Cream of asparagus . . . bacon and eggs. Hmm . . . it's not cream of bacon and eggs, is it?"

"Nope. I could fix it that way especially for you, though. Chase it around with a fork, mush it up . . ."

"You do that and I'll drop a tree on you!"

He offered her his arm. "Bacon and eggs twice then. There is no electricity, so you'll have to help me get the cookstove going. Luckily, we have plenty of wood . . ."

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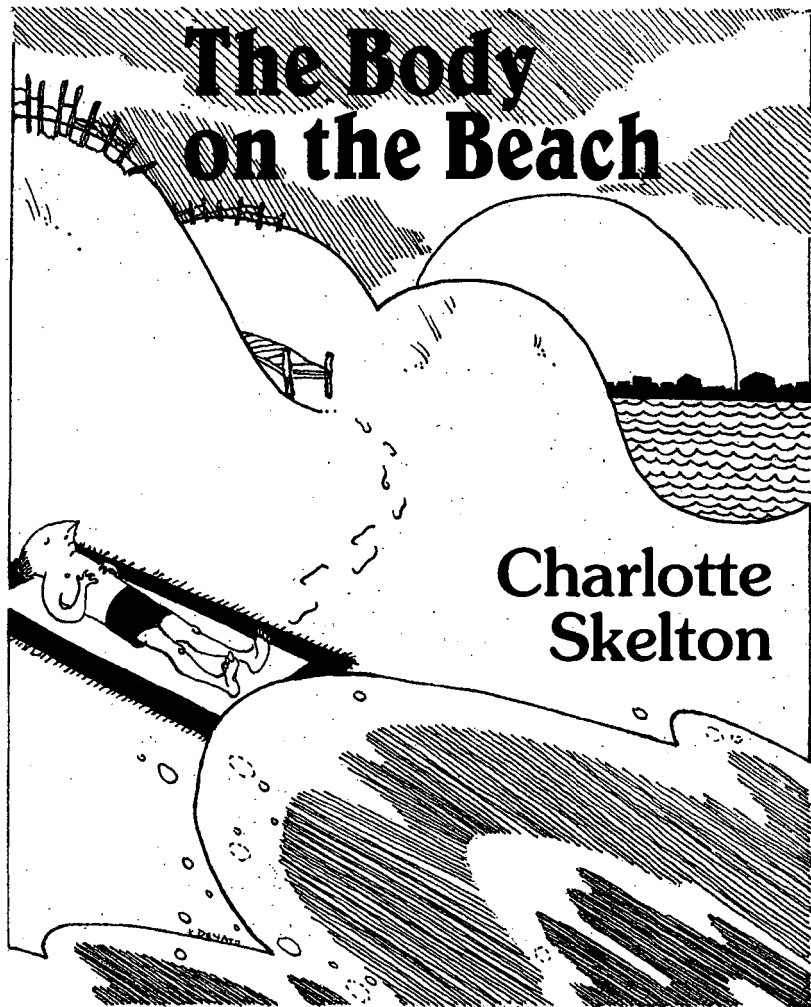
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The Body on the Beach

Charlotte Skelton



It lay neatly on its back, just above the hightide mark. It was male, wearing swimming trunks and a peaceful expression. Beside it lay a book and an empty can of Budweiser. It was very pale, except for the blotchy, blood-red marks on its face and arms, and the even whiter patch where its watch had been removed.

All around, Greek beach life continued unconcerned, testimony to the fact that the story of the good Samaritan was going unheeded that day. Nearby two children, looking like deserters from the Foreign Legion with white hankies sewn to the back of their white baseball caps, and glossy with suntan lotion, were building a Hi-Tech Temporary Marine

Construction (sandcastle) with utter concentration. Occasionally grains of their building material shot out of control and landed on the legs of the body, but neither it nor they noticed. The beach vendor, this morning selling sticky, honey-soaked baklava, wound his way along the beach, stopping here and there to make a sale. Hatted and nut-brown, he would be back later with slices of cool watermelon as the day got even hotter.

As lunchtime approached, many of the holidaymakers began packing up their belongings, preparing to leave the scorching sand and seek the shade of the local tavernas and cafes for a snack and afternoon videos, or their darkened, ceiling-fanned hotel rooms. The beach population dwindled to only a few unwary souls, sheltering under their umbrellas and awnings.

And the body.

Through the heat of the afternoon both the eye-scorchingly white village and the glisteningly blue sea shimmered in the heat haze. Nothing stirred. No gulls' screeches disturbed the heat-heavy peace. The cats lay exhausted in the shade of trees or houses. The locals slept or sat, nodding, in rocking chairs under shady fig trees. Day trippers ate and talked quietly under the awnings of cafes, longing to return to the air-conditioned, "Zorba's Dance"-playing comfort of their coach, the heat sapping their energy and their enthusiasm for the tempting little giftshops that lined the waterfront.

The tide came in gently, reaching almost to the feet of the body.

Eventually the coaches left for their return journey. The temperature of the midday sun-oven cooled to high roast, and gradually people began to emerge from their afternoon hibernation. The last few occupants of the beach collected their things and headed back to their hotels for a short rest, a shower, and a change of clothes before the evening meal, Greek dancing, and excessive alcohol intake. The beach was completely deserted.

Except for the body.

About seven o'clock a few couples returned to the beach, walking hand in hand. It was cool now, with a pleasant light breeze off the sea. The tide had gone out a little, and they waded through the shallows, swishing their feet as they made their way towards the tavernas at the far end of the village.

As the rapid Greek twilight fell, the last of these couples was curious to see a throbbingly red-raw, stiffly robotlike figure leaving the beach with the feeling he might be sorry in the morning.

PAY PHONE

Michael Z. Lewin



“I laid it all out for them,” Nigel Bartolome said. “I used simple, declarative English. I even made enlargements of the bills and highlighted them in three colors.”

Angelo Lunghi glanced at his wife. Eyes lowered, Gina appeared to be focused on her notebook and pencil, but from Angelo’s vantage point he could see she had written almost nothing.

He turned back to the pleasant-looking man in his early forties who was a prospective client. He’d walked into the Lunghi Detective Agency office with a light step and a smile on his face. There had been nothing to warn them that he was an obsessive. “So I take it that the police did not respond in the way you hoped?” Angelo said.

Bartolome shook his head sadly. “If a tax-paying member of the public brings in unambiguous proof that a crime’s been committed, you’d *think* the police would be interested. I even went to the police station myself, so as to obviate the necessity of an officer having to find 3 Ayling Close. Would you believe, some of the maps of Bath omit our little cul-de-sac altogether. Including the map that’s distributed for free at the tourist office. You’d expect *them* to want to be accurate, of all people, though you’d be disappointed, I promise you. Not that I *want* tourists coming to gawk at our little Grade II listed cottages, but right’s right and there’s not much point having a map if it’s wrong. Call me old fashioned if you like.”

“Excuse me for interrupting,” Gina said, “but do you live alone in 3 Ayling Close?”

“Alone, yes.” Bartolome folded his hands together. “Alone in the sense of no one living in the house with me. At least not for the last seven years, which is when my then-wife chose to depart.”

Angelo watched as Gina wrote “alone” and “wife 7 years ago” below Nigel Bartolome’s name, address, and telephone number. “But you did actually see a police officer?” he asked.

“I saw, briefly, Detective Constable Dolores Palmyra,” Nigel Bartolome said. “They tried to palm me off with a uniformed officer, but I insisted on seeing someone from C.I.D. because they’re the ones with the power to investigate.”

“And what exactly did DC Palmyra have to say?” Almost immediately Angelo added, “The gist of it, please. I don’t need all the details.” He saw Gina’s shoulders give a little twitch, then another. She’d better not laugh. Bad Gina. That would be terribly unprofessional. What would Papa say?

“So can he pay, this Nigel?” the Old Man said.

“He left a deposit, Papa,” Gina said to her father-in-law.

“If he can pay, who cares that he fusses?” The Old Man took a pickle from his plate and studied it. He didn’t remember pickles on plates. Why suddenly were there pickles? Was it somehow to do with Mama being

away, shopping with that Gabriela? Were they sneaking pickles past her? "Huh!" he said, unable to remember whether his wife liked pickles. He took a bite.

"How is it, Papa?" asked Rosetta, Angelo's younger sister, who looked after the agency's accounts. "There's a new pickle stall in the market, and I thought I'd try it out."

There was a pause at the table as everybody turned to the Old Man. "It's a pickle," he said, frowning. But as he spoke, he noticed a lingering taste of chili. And was that ginger? "Huh!" He took another bite.

"Let me get this straight," said Salvatore, Angelo and Rosetta's older brother. Although Salvatore was the one family member who no longer lived at home, he did work for the family agency occasionally, and he ate at the family table often. "This Bartolome guy thinks someone is making calls on his telephone, and he came to you because the police won't investigate it for him?"

"That's the gist of it," Angelo said.

"Making what calls? Like ordering pizzas, or what?"

Marie, Gina and Angelo's teenage daughter, said, "Why doesn't Mr. Bartolome just unplug his telephone and lock it away? Or does he think that such a thing is immoral and a denial of the basic human right of communication?" Marie glared briefly at her mother.

Gina said, "When you convince us that you can keep your telephone calls under control, we'll talk about basic human rights."

"She lacks self-control," said David, Marie's younger brother, to no one in particular.

"And she doesn't have the money to pay for her appetites."

"You *could* pay me for the work I do around here," Marie said as she took three slices of ham from the serving plate.

"What work?" Angelo said.

"You can tell she lacks self-control by the way she eats," David said.

"Control *yourself*, please, David," Gina said.

Marie picked up a slice of ham and rubbed it on her brother's face. As he sputtered, she said, "You're so right, Parma-nut. I have no self-control whatsoever."

"Marie Lunghi—" Angelo began.

"I'm going. I'm going." Marie got up. "I deserve to be punished. I'll lock myself in my room. *Without* a telephone." She left the kitchen.

"I don't know what's got into her these days," Gina said, with a sigh.

As David wiped his face with a napkin, the Old Man said, "So why not lock up the telephone for this Nigel client?"

"He's already tried that, Papa," Angelo said. "He has two telephones. One is combined with an answering machine, and the other is a cordless. Since the illicit calls began, he carries the cordless with him all the time. He tried locking the other one in a box while he was out at work, but it had no effect."

"Not surprising, since it was a pointless thing to do in the first place," Gina said. "Why lock up handsets and do nothing about the plugs in the wall? All someone would have to do is bring in a handset of his own."

"Or her own," Angelo said. "But please, nobody tell Marie that."

"What does Bartolome do for a living?" Salvatore asked.

"He works for HTV as a continuity announcer. You know, the voice that comes on between programs to say what's next, or to apologize because something's gone wrong."

"And how long have the calls in question been going on?"

"All this calendar year," Angelo said. "And we're not talking chicken feed. In the six months since January there have been more than eight hundred pounds' worth of unauthorized calls on his line."

"Eight hundred," the Old Man said. "Huh!"

"Sounds about what Marie would spend in a week if you let her," David said.

After the dinner dishes were cleared, the family retired to the living room except for the self-excluded Marie, and Rosetta, who went line dancing Wednesday nights at the Pavilion.

"So when is Mama due back?" Angelo asked his father.

"Tomorrow on the train," Papa said. "Such a palaver about sinks and ovens." His wife's trip to London with her friend Gabriela was for the purpose of selecting kitchen equipment for Gabriela's daughter's new cafe venture.

"Do you have plans for tonight, Papa?" Salvatore asked. "You going out to play while the cat's away?"

"What cat?" the Old Man said. "You call your mother a cat? And what play? How should I play when I have a wife in London and a son whose idea of work is to paint pictures? Huh!"

"You want me to work on the case?" Salvatore said. "Okay, let's work." He turned to his brother and sister-in-law. "This Nigel, he has itemized bills for his phone?"

"Itemized, enlarged, and highlighted in three colors," Gina said.

"The unauthorized calls in yellow," Angelo said, "the calls he made himself in pink, and the calls his sister made in green."

"He can attribute every call?"

"It's like reconciling a checkbook," Angelo said, mimicking their client's precise enunciation. "How else can one know whether the telephone company is adding fictitious calls to augment its already excessive profits?"

"You should show respect," the Old Man said, "if this client can pay."

"Maybe the phone company is adding fictitious calls," Salvatore said.

"Bartolome has had exhaustive dealings with the phone company," Gina said, "and he's satisfied himself that is not what's happening."

"So we respect the client's assessment," Angelo said.

"Huh!"

David said, "May I ask a question?"

"Certainly, son," Angelo said.

"If Nigel's sister doesn't live with him, why does she make calls from his phone?"

"Good question." Angelo applauded his son. "We asked that."

"The sister lives next door with her son," Gina said. "She cleans Nigel's house, and in exchange she uses the phone there to ring her husband, who is working in the Middle East."

Salvatore shook his head. "All this counting up . . ."

"Counting up ensures you keep something to count," the Old Man said. "Or am I wrong all these years because I counted for my children? You could learn from such a client, Salvatore."

In the pause that followed, David said, "You can tell who's been rung from itemized bills, can't you, Dad?"

"Of course."

"So are the unauthorized calls long distance? Or maybe premium numbers? Chat and sex lines can run up big bills fast, can't they?"

Everyone turned to David.

"What?" David said. Another pause followed as his face turned bright pink.

"There were a lot of premium calls in the first couple of months," Angelo said.

"I heard about them on TV," David said. "Honest."

"But," Gina said, "Nigel had them blocked. So don't get any ideas."

"Mum!"

"Since then, the calls have been to various overseas numbers—some of them sex lines, too—and more recently there have been long spells on the Internet."

Angelo said, "Nigel—and the phone company—tried tracking the numbers, but none of them produced any clues about who was calling."

"There's no pattern at all?" Salvatore asked.

"Only that the calls are always made when Nigel is out of the house."

"How does the call-poacher know when Nigel is out of the house?"

"We think," Angelo said, "that it could be from watching HTV. If Nigel's voice is on television, that means he's in Bristol and at least twenty minutes away."

Gina said, "Nigel's even tried ringing home from work, getting an engaged signal, then ringing his sister to get her to rush next door."

"And have her son go to the back door. But they've never caught anyone."

"Although apparently the sister refused to search through cupboards and under the bed and such, in case she *did* catch someone. Running up phone bills is one thing. Running *into* a stranger is quite another."

"Sensible woman," Salvatore said, "compared to her brother."

"So," Angelo said, "Nigel went to the police to get them to stake the house out while he was at work."

"Only they wouldn't."

"So he came to us."

"You know I'm going to fail my exams, don't you?" Marie said at breakfast.

"Do I?" Gina said.

"You had a point to make about my telephone calls, I admit that, but if I can't talk on the phone with Cassie, I don't have a hope in hell of passing."

"Pity."

"Do you *want* me to fail? Is *that* it? You can't bear for me to be an academic success just because you weren't?"

Wasn't I? Gina thought. Funny, *my* parents were pretty pleased. She rose to put a slice of toast in the toaster.

"All I want is to have the opportunity to accomplish more with my life than going to art college and dropping out. Is that too much to ask?"

Dropping out to marry your father and spawn you, Gina thought. She said, "Life is so beastly unfair," and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Do you think *I* could have a piece of toast, or is that too expensive, too?"

"So what's happening about Nigel's phone today?" David asked as he came into the kitchen. "You going to bug it?"

But before Gina could respond, Rosetta came into the kitchen from the landing. "Morning, morning, everyone." She stopped inside the door, crossed one leg over the other, and then spun around. "That's called an 'unwind.'"

"Ooo-la," Marie said. "It's nice that someone's happy around here."

"What's this about bugs? Do we need to call the exterminator?" Rosetta took a mug and filled it from the teapot.

"David asked if we're going to bug the phone-client's own phone," Gina said, "but before we start things like that, we're going to talk with his sister."

"His sister?" Rosetta sat. "Is she a suspect?"

"Seems unlikely. But she is the only other person with a key to the house."

"Is there anything you want me to do?"

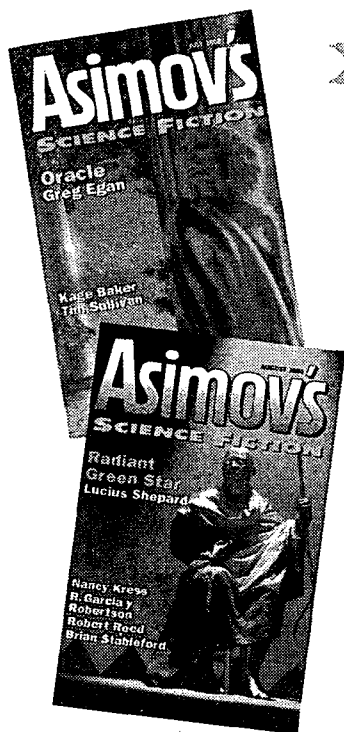
"Well, you might look at the itemized bills. Maybe you'll see a pattern that the client missed."

"Can I help?" David said.

"Let him, Mum," Marie said. "The nerd's got a special affinity for numbers. It's not like they're *human*."

Angelo's first stop in the morning was at number 5, Ayling Close, the

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home of Fiona Castle, Nigel's sister. He got there about ten. A tall, very thin woman answered the door. "Mrs. Castle?"

"Who wants to know?" the woman asked, but Angelo soon established who he was and what he wanted to talk about. She found it hard to believe. "Nigel has actually gone and hired someone about this telephone business?"

"That's right."

Mrs. Castle snorted. "Poor you. I've heard nothing but bloody telephone bills from Nigel all year long. Sometimes I want to run an extension from my phone through the wall so he can unplug his telephone line altogether."

"Would that work, do you think? He *has* changed his phone number."

"Twice." Mrs. Castle sat down with a sigh, facing him.

She struck Angelo as exasperated with her brother rather than sympathetic to his problem.

"As I understand it, only you and your brother have keys to his house."

"That's right."

"Could someone have copied your key without your knowledge?"

"Without my knowledge?" Mrs. Castle smiled. "How would I know?"

"I apologize for being inexact," Angelo said.

Fiona Castle raised a finger. "I'm *not* like my brother, all right? Inexactitude is not a crime with me. But we did share a father who loved twisting people's words if they gave him a chance. When your language is being examined all the time, awareness of such things becomes automatic."

"What I'm asking is whether you have, perhaps, lost your handbag with the key in it, or . . ."

"I know what you're getting at, Mr. Lunghi, but it won't help you. I don't carry Nigel's key. I keep it in a bowl by my phone. So, to copy it without my knowledge, someone would have to have broken in here and then returned it. But doing all that just to enter Nigel's house to use his telephone but not for any other purpose doesn't make sense. Besides, Nigel's changed the locks twice."

"I take your point, but if it were someone who came into your house regularly . . ."

"There are no regular visitors here who would know about Nigel's key, unless you count Robby, my son."

"Could your son be involved?"

"I can't imagine Robby going into Nigel's house voluntarily. He thinks his Uncle Nigel is creepy. But you can talk to him about it yourself if you come back after school."

"How old is he?"

"Seventeen in a couple of weeks."

"Ah. So he's a mystery. I sympathize."

"Well, there's no need," Fiona Castle said with a laugh. "Robby's pret-

ty quiet, at least around here. Maybe the computer generation is going to be as quiet as ours was loud."

Angelo scratched his chin and thought about David. He was by far the more computery of his children. Was he quiet?

"In my family the troublesome one is Nigel," Fiona Castle went on. "He thinks nothing of ringing me at midnight so I can run into his house and face down some complete stranger. 'Take a poker,' he tells me, even though I don't have a poker because we've been on the gas here for years, which he knows full well."

"Nevertheless, you have gone into the house?"

"Robby came with me. He's soft as warm butter, my son, but he's six feet six, so he might look scary."

"But you never saw anyone."

"No. Nor heard anyone. Nor detected a trace of anyone."

"Although you got into the house pretty quickly?"

"Within a few minutes of Nigel ringing. But after rushing next door three times in one week, I told Nigel to stuff it."

"After I left the sister, I toured our client's house," Angelo told Gina later, at lunch. "And I checked where the phone line comes in and so on. It felt like a waste of the client's money, since it's all exactly as he described it yesterday. What's the soup?"

"Which is no surprise. Tomato with basil. Shop-bought."

"Not bad." Angelo slurped happily. "Not bad at all. Did you know that Bartolome's even fingerprinted his phones? Wiped them before leaving for work and then dusted them when he got home."

"I'd suggest that he cover his phone with his own fingerprints and check whether they'd been wiped when he got home if it weren't stupid to assume someone breaking in wouldn't bring his or her own handset."

"As you observed last night. There's more bread?"

"Sure. Would you like a pickle?" Gina asked. "I'm getting one."

"What's with Rosetta and the pickles?"

"Your question should be, 'What's with Rose and the pickle-seller?'"

"Sorry to be inexact." Angelo thought for a moment. "I guess I wasn't inexact. I was exact, but asking the wrong question."

"Isn't that probably our client's problem, too? Surely it's wrong to assume someone's breaking into the house rather than tapping into the line from somewhere outside. I know he's had the phone company check the wiring outside, but I think we should have it checked again to see if someone is getting physical access to his line somehow."

"Makes sense to me," Angelo said. He bit into a pickle. "Mmmm, spicy. Want a taste?"

"Welcome home, Mama," Rosetta said when the family assembled for dinner that evening.

"Such a trip," Mama said. "Such cooking machines they have these days. You put in a seed at one end, and you get out tomato sauce. Though not such a sauce as this one, my own Rosetta's." Mama smacked her lips.

"At what cost your machines?" the Old Man said. "You see chip wonders on the television but never the price."

"For chips you need potatoes, not tomatoes," Mama said.

"I meant the microbe chips."

"I know your meaning. After all these years I shouldn't know your meaning?"

"Huh!"

"So did Gabriela buy a lot of equipment for her Nina?" Gina asked.

"Gabby buys brochures, and prices, and she makes calculations. Nina and the husband will decide later what they can afford and order by telephone. But such things we saw in London even on the streets. A woman with blue spikes for hair and nothing else, and horse tattoos all over her arms, she calls to a little one, 'Come to Granny!' Never in my life would I imagine such a granny. I should go to London more often."

"Are you going to get tattoos, Grandma?" David said. "And punk hair?"

"So go to London," the Old Man said. "Punk your head. Who stops you?"

Mama hugged her husband. "My oldest baby, this one."

"Get off, old woman."

"So how are my other children? Did you miss me, or were you so busy?"

"We all missed you lots, Grandma," Marie said.

"Oh, so sweet, my Marie, to say."

"She just wants to use your telephone," David said.

"My telephone? What about it?"

"Nothing about it," Marie said. "Wonk-head is just obsessed with telephones because we're working on a new case."

"What case?" Mama turned to Angelo. "And where is my Salvatore tonight?"

"He told me he's painting tonight," Rosetta said. "He sends his apologies."

"Painting is good," Mama said. "It's what he does." She turned to her husband. "Nothing to say?"

"I say, 'Have a pickle.'"

"What pickle?"

"In fact, have Salvatore paint one and say, 'It's a pretty pickle.'"

"What are you talking about pickles?"

"Now we have pickles sneaked in behind your London. But they're not bad. Me, I'll have another. See?" The Old Man took a pickle. "Mmmm."

"The case, Mama," Angelo said, "concerns a client's telephone. Someone has run up big bills without the client's permission. We had someone check today that nobody is running a wire from the phone line, but nobody can work out how the illicit user is getting into the house."

"Who needs to get into the house?" Mama said. "All over the train and pavements there are telephones with no houses. Telephones with no wires that ring all the time, and people talk as if no one can hear them so they must shout."

"Those are mobile phones, Mama," Angelo said. But he turned to Gina.

"The cordless?" they said together.

After the dinner dishes were in the machine, Angelo decided to call his client. He wanted details of the cordless telephone, its make and model. But the line was engaged.

From the kitchen he went into the living room where Rosetta and Gina were talking about Mama. He turned the television on to HTV.

A few minutes after the closing strains of the "Coronation Street" theme song faded, Nigel Bartolome's voice urged viewers to stay tuned for an episode of a superb Victorian police detective series, *Cribb*.

Angelo turned the set off and dialed Bartolome's number. Still engaged.

"What?" Rosetta asked.

"I think the telephone bandit may be using our client's line even as we speak."

Gina said, "Do you want to go over there?"

"Yeah," Angelo said. "I do. Fast as we can."

Seventeen minutes later the three Lunghis were in front of 3 Ayling Close. The house was dark, but when Angelo called Nigel Bartolome's number on his mobile phone, the line was still engaged.

"What now?" Gina asked.

"I'll go to the alley where I can see his back door. I'll call you when I'm in position. Then one of you go next door to ask for the key."

"Be careful," Gina said. "If this does involve some kind of cordless connection, then the bad guy could be hiding somewhere outside, like in the bushes."

"It's only a phone-time thief." But Angelo nodded. Someone committing a comparatively petty crime *might* turn violent if surprised. And surprise was what they were aiming for. "You guys be careful, too." He left for the back of the house.

Gina had to ring the bell at 5 Ayling Close twice before she heard sounds inside. Then the door was opened to the extent of the the gap left by the door chain. "Mrs. Castle?"

"Who wants to know?"

After explaining who she was, Gina said, "I'd like to borrow the key to your brother's house, please. The phone there is being used now although your brother is at work."

Fiona Castle undid the chain and opened the door wide. "Yeah? And you're going in?"

"My husband is at the back, and my sister-in-law is with me at the front."

"Would you like Robby and me to come too? Just in case . . ."

"Good, yes."

"Come in while I get the key."

Gina took a step into the house as Mrs. Castle took a key from the bowl by her telephone. "Robby!" she called up the stairs. "Robby!"

When Mrs. Castle called a third time, Gina heard a door opening upstairs. "What is it, Mum?" a boy called. "'Cause I'm on the phone."

Mrs. Castle was about to explain when Gina put a hand on the woman's arm. "Do you mind if we go up?"

When Marie emerged from her room, she was surprised to find the living room and the kitchen empty. Not that her parents were obliged to tell her where they were going when they went out or what time they'd be back. Oh no, such things were for children only, one-way traffic, do-what-I-say-not-what-I-do. Life was so unfair.

She'd intended to ask permission to go over to Cassie's house, but if they *were* out, she could ring and no one would know. Cautiously, before making the call, Marie went to Rosetta's room to see if she were out, too. But instead of her aunt she found David. He was hunched over Auntie Rose's desk studying some papers marked in various colors. "I'm going to tell," Marie said.

David jerked upright. "Go ahead. I have permission."

If he were lying, Marie thought, she could neutralize David if he caught her on the phone. "Do you know where Ma and Pa are, *Breathosaurus*?"

With his attention split between Marie and the colored papers, David could only manage a negative grunt.

"Thanks, Shakespeare," Marie said, pleased with her own wit. She swanned out of Rosetta's room and headed for the kitchen telephone. It would be wise to keep the call short. Getting caught would be *bad*.

"Where have you been?" Rosetta asked as Gina returned to the front of 3 Ayling Close.

"Slight alteration in plan. This is Mrs. Castle, the client's sister, and her son Robby."

"Hello," Mrs. Castle whispered from slightly behind Gina. Over Mrs. Castle's shoulder Rosetta saw a very tall, thin boy—a slouching, reluctant shadow. Wasn't he the one who'd helped out before when the sister had been sent to catch the phone-time bandit?

Gina said, "I'm going unlock it now." When she opened the door, all four crept into the house. "Mrs. Castle, could you lead me to the back door, please? You two stay here, to block this way out."

"Okay," Rosetta said. When the other two women had left them, she

said, "I'm Rosetta Lunghi," and stuck out her hand to the boy. He shook hands weakly, and grunted.

Marie had been on the telephone with Cassie less than five minutes when she heard the outside door open downstairs. "Bugger," she said. "I think they're back."

"See you in school tomorrow. Bye," Cassie said.

Marie hung up the kitchen phone. She could hear only one set of footsteps. It might just be one of her grandparents, in which case maybe she would call Cassie back. She sighed as she listened. Sometimes it seemed that her grandparents were the only people in the family who loved her.

But as Marie sat at the kitchen table trying to look wistful and virtuous, her Uncle Salvatore came in.

"Anybody home?" he asked.

"Just me and David," Marie said. "Feel free to use the telephone if you like."

"I will," Salvatore said, looking puzzled. "Are your parents likely to be back soon?" He opened the refrigerator.

But before Marie could answer, David came in. "Are Ma and Pa here? Because I think I've found something in these itemized telephone bills."

"What?" Marie said. "Drool because they're all numbers?"

When Angelo came in through the back door of Nigel Bartolome's house, the first thing he did was go to the telephone and answering machine. Standing beside it he dialed his client's number on his mobile. The line was still engaged. "Okay, someone's using the line, but not the phone." He looked at the boy who was towering behind the three women. "You are . . ."

"Robby. My son," Mrs. Castle said.

"Hi."

"Lo," Robby said, his eyes on the floor.

"Geronimo," Angelo said, and he picked up the receiver of the phone and put it to his ear. He frowned. There was no sound except "noise"—as when you hit a button on the television's remote control for which there was no channel. "I don't understand." He passed the receiver to Gina. Then to the others.

Robby only needed to listen for a second. "Internet," he said.

"You see," David said, "the earliest time in the afternoon that there were unauthorized calls was four thirty-two."

"Oh yeah, Mr. Smarty-specs?" Marie said, pointing to a one thirteen P.M. call marked in yellow. "What about there?"

"But that was on a Sunday."

Salvatore said, "The unauthorized calls were all made when Nigel was out. That's the key, isn't it?"

"Yes and no," David said, leaning back. "The client being out is what we call 'necessary, but not sufficient' in symbolic logic."

"We do?" Salvatore said.

"It's necessary for Mr. Bartolome to be out, but it's not enough for him to be out. The phone bandit has restrictions on the times he or she makes calls, too. For instance, Mr. Bartolome sometimes works Saturday daytimes, but there aren't any unauthorized calls then. Well, except once. But there *are* calls on the Saturday nights when the client is working. Why nights, but not mornings and afternoons?"

"So you're saying the bandit might not always be able to get to the equipment he or she needs to tap into the phone line?"

"Or the bandit might be doing other things."

"So you're saying that the timing of the unauthorized calls tells us something about the bandit's movements?"

Fiona Castle made tea as the Lunghis and Robby sat around Nigel Bartolome's kitchen table.

Angelo said, "Having now witnessed the fact that the unauthorized caller doesn't need to come into the house, and having eliminated the possibility of a tap into external wires, the only possibility we're left with is that someone is able to get into the line via the cordless even though the client carries the phone with him wherever he goes."

"If you buy another cordless telephone of the same brand and model, would it work on this phone line?" Gina asked.

"No," Rosetta said. "Each cordless is coded to prevent that. They have, like, sixty-four thousand different codes. It is possible to set it up so two cordless phones can use the same line, but you need to program both phones at the same time."

"And that couldn't be done without Mr. Bartolome knowing. Unless . . ."

"What?" Angelo said.

"Maybe the phone broke and was taken in for repair. Maybe someone at the repairer coded a second phone."

"But even if you have a second cordless phone programmed to use this line, it has to be somewhere close by. Like within a hundred feet of the base unit. And then to use the line to go on the net we are talking about someone hiding in the bushes with a second cordless phone, a computer, and the adaptor to make them work together."

"Unlikely, I agree," Angelo said.

"Honestly," Fiona Castle said, "if it's the ruddy cordless telephone that's been causing all this trouble, I sincerely wish that I'd never given it to Nigel."

The Lunghis all turned to face her.

With Bartolome's sheets of itemized calls spread out on the kitchen

table David showed Salvatore and Marie what he'd found. "I've listed the times of all the unauthorized calls, breaking them down by days of the week."

Frowning, Salvatore said, "It's not all that cut-and-dried. There are those two Monday mornings, though, I agree, otherwise, there's nothing before four thirty-two."

"Uh-huh," David said.

But he was smiling, which Marie knew meant her brother had something up his sleeve. "There's something he hasn't told you yet, Uncle Salvatore."

"There is?" He turned to his nephew. "Do you have an idea about the caller?"

"My theory is that none of the calls were made during school hours, Uncle Sal."

Salvatore considered. "But the Monday mornings?"

David smiled even more broadly. "It's a case of what we call in science, the exception proving the rule. Meaning that something that seems to contradict the theory actually fits with it."

"And the meaning in this case?" Salvatore said with a sigh.

"Those Monday morning calls were on Bank Holidays." In case his uncle hadn't recognized the significance, he added, "No school."

"So you're saying the phone bandit is a schoolkid?"

"I think so, yes," David said.

"But why aren't there any calls Saturday daytimes?" Marie asked, impressed despite herself.

"Well, that would be explained if the kid has a Saturday job."

"And that one Saturday call?"

"Off sick?"

"It was a Christmas present," Fiona Castle said. "I asked Nigel what he wanted, and he told me, including the make and model. He said that he'd looked in *Which?* and that it had the best range for the money."

"So where did you buy it?" Gina asked.

"Argos. Well, I mean it was bought at Argos. I didn't do the actual buying of it myself." She looked at her son.

Robby, who had not yet said an intelligible word, cleared his throat twice and said, "Adge."

"What?"

"It's his friend," Mrs. Castle said. "Billy Padgett. *Padgett*, hence Adge."

"And what is the significance of Adge Padgett?" Angelo asked.

"He works at Argos on Saturdays. He gets an employee discount. He got the phone for us."

Gina and Angelo exchanged a glance.

"I think we'd better talk with young Adge," Gina said. "Where does he live?"

"Next door," Mrs. Castle said. "At number 1."

"I tell you, Cassie," Marie said on the telephone the next evening, "it was like the answer to a prayer."

"All because they caught this kid on the phone?"

"That, and because I threatened them." Marie put her feet up on the windowsill and swept her hair back with her free hand. Yes! Life was sweet again.

"How?"

"Okay, what happened was that this kid who works at Argos on Saturdays was asked to get a cordless phone for a next-door neighbor."

"Yeah . . ."

"But what he did was get *two* cordless phones, and then he did some nerdy thing to make it so that both phones will work on the same line."

"Okay . . ." Cassie said.

"So when the neighbor got his phone, the kid used the second cordless to make free calls on the neighbor's line right through the wall! Is that heaven, or what?"

"Wow!"

"And then," Marie said, "while our very own nerdy-trog David has gone blind by working out that it was a schoolkid who made the mystery calls, Ma and Pa and Auntie Rose had already caught the kid themselves, so all little Davy's numeracy went to waste."

"Wicked," Cassie said.

"It *was* a detail that gave me extreme pleasure of a nearly orgasmic nature."

"But I still don't understand how that meant you got your telephone privileges back."

"Personally, I think communication is a right, not a privilege."

"Right on."

Marie laughed. Someone knocked on the door to her room. "I'm on the phone," she called.

From the hall Angelo called back, "What kind of homework involves hysterical laughter?"

"Drama homework, Pa. We're working on the practical for the humor module. How can you work on humor without laughing?"

"Just don't take liberties, young lady."

"Go away, Pa. I need to concentrate." Marie heard Cassie giggling in her ear. "You heard that, huh?"

"But, Marie, you said something about a threat."

"Yeah. What I told them was if my phone calls were so expensive, then I'd have to get a part-time job. And I said, I've heard that there's a Saturday job about to open up at Argos."

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The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

CHINESE PUZZLE

Paul G. Reeve

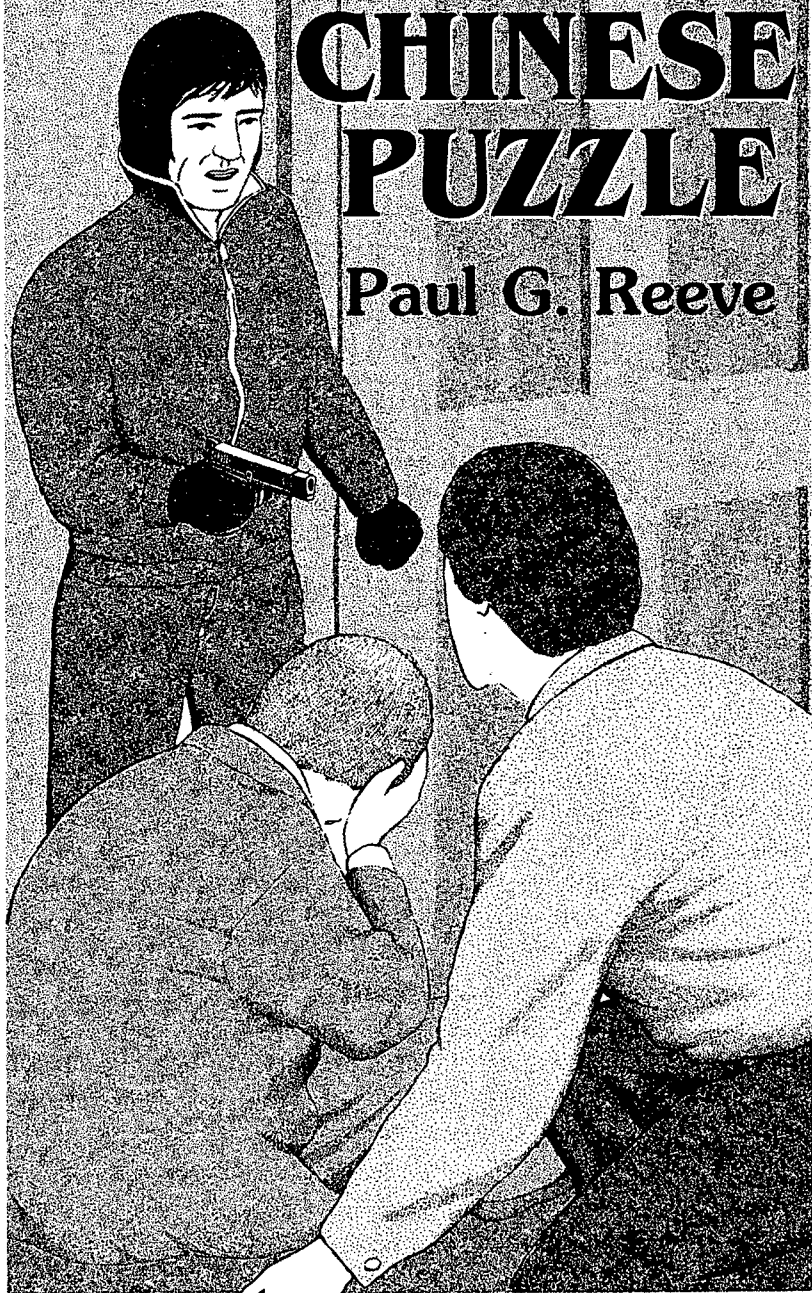


Illustration by David Fielding

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/01

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It is the most spectacular view in Washington, D.C. From a bluff overlooking the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, you can see, to your left, Alexandria and the George Washington Masonic National Memorial, and to your right, the Catholic University of America and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. In an arc across your field of vision between the two are all the notable landmarks and monuments of the Washington area—Pentagon, Jefferson Memorial, Custis-Lee Mansion, Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, White House, Capitol, you name it.

It's almost as though it were symbolic of something.

A nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there. It's a spot on the grounds of Saint Elizabeths Hospital (that's right, like *Finnegans Wake* or *Howards End*, there's no apostrophe). Historically, the most famous resident was probably Ezra Pound, whose anti-Semitic, pro-Mussolini broadcasts from Italy during World War II left U.S. authorities with the choice of executing America's most influential poet for treason or locking him up in a laughing academy. At present the most famous resident is John Hinckley, who shot Ronald Reagan in an attempt to impress Jodie Foster.

I had come to St. E's, as the place is familiarly called, at the request of my old friend Dr. Matthew Reynolds, a psychologist on the hospital staff. Matt and I had been friends since college. We had taken to one another immediately be-

cause we were both from Tennessee and not many others at George Washington University were.

After graduating, I stuck around to do some graduate work at GW, and Matt went off, eventually to get a Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin. For a while he taught at some university in the Midwest. When he saw an advertised opening at Saint Elizabeths in the late sixties, he jumped at the opportunity to get into clinical work full time and to get back to Washington.

That's when we took up together again. I had never left D.C. In the intervening years I had been knocking around Capitol Hill in a variety of staff jobs. Despite our difference in backgrounds, when we met again it was as though no time had passed. We picked up where we'd left off after graduation. By the mid-eighties we had seen each other through personal and professional traumas—his marriage and divorce, my ill-fated attempt at a career change—and had remained good friends.

I wondered why he had asked me to come out to St. E's. We usually met for lunch two or three times a year, and exchanged social invitations to one another's homes, but rarely did either of us venture into the other's professional territory. So I said, "This is a great view, but I don't think it's what you asked me up here for."

"I've got a patient who's an acquaintance of yours," Matt said. I looked at him quizzically. After thirty-odd years on the Hill, most of my friends were politicians, bureaucrats, or lobbyists. And while

some of them were arguably crazy, they generally functioned well enough to stay out of Saint Elizabeths. "An amnesia victim," he continued. "An attempted suicide, apparently. He shot himself in the head, and now he doesn't know why, or even *if* he shot himself."

"Okay, but who is he? Why do you think I know him?" I asked.

"Because he had your business card in his wallet. According to his driver's license, his name is Henry Bodger. The driver's license was expired. He hadn't lived at the address for at least five years."

"Bodger?"

"Yeah. That card of yours was an old one. Administrative assistant to Senator Sansom."

That was old. Senator Sansom had retired in 1969. But who was Henry Bodger? I couldn't place the name.

We walked across the campus, back to the hospital. Bodger was in the day room sitting at a table playing solitaire. A balding man of sixty-plus with a grizzled beard, wearing striped pajamas and a blue bathrobe, he held the deck loosely in his left hand and turned the cards with his right. The wound to the right side of his brain had apparently weakened his left side. Even the left side of his face drooped slightly.

"Henry," Matt said, "there's someone here to see you."

Henry looked up. "Oh... Dr. Reynolds. You startled me." He looked at me. "Well, I'll be damned. Ross Ward!"

"Harry Butcher!" The name suddenly popped into my head. I had

forgotten, if I had ever known, that his real name was Bodger, that "Butcher," the name he was universally known by, was a nom de plume. Harry Butcher had been on the fringes of the Beat Generation in the fifties. He was no Jack Kerouac or Allen Ginsberg, but he had written one novel that got some critical attention. By the sixties the muse had deserted him. He had tried to find her in the bottom of a bourbon bottle without much luck. Meanwhile he paid the bills, when he could, by flacking for a variety of conservative causes. Like Kerouac and unlike Ginsberg, he had taken a sharp right turn in the sixties.

The last time I'd seen him had been at the kickoff for Free China Week in the seventies. That must have been one of the greatest debacles in the annals of political flackery, and the last gasp of the old China Lobby. The event, promoting the interests of the Nationalist Chinese, was held the same week as Nixon's opening to the People's Republic but before Nixon's initiative was announced. Some of the high-profile hosts of the event had seen the handwriting on the wall and had not even shown up for the cocktail party. Harry had been left holding the bag. He hustled around trying to talk up the Nationalist Chinese cause among the guests, who were, for the most part, like me—flunkies and lower-level bureaucrats looking for a free drink. Only one senator was there and one journalist. The senator, I think, just dropped by because he was in the neighborhood. The journalist was a reporter for the *Post*

Style section who left as soon as she saw that no "names" were there.

"Where you been keeping yourself, Harry?" I asked.

"Here and there," he answered vaguely, focusing on a spot somewhere behind me. "I . . . I don't know."

"Been doing any more work for the Chinese?" I asked, for want of any more recent memories of Harry's activities. It was the wrong thing to say.

He looked around furtively, then lowered his head and shook it vigorously. After that he withdrew into himself and wouldn't say anything more.

Matt and I went back to his office, and he told me what he knew of Harry's story. He had been found on the C&O Canal towpath near Key Bridge. The weapon, a .22 caliber target pistol, was lying on the path beside him. He was found almost immediately, which was lucky. Despite its being near the heart of Georgetown, the towpath west of Key Bridge is dark and isolated at night.

Harry couldn't remember why he was at the canal, or why he had shot himself—if he had. He'd been taken initially to Georgetown University Hospital, but his amnesia, erratic behavior, and indigence made him a candidate for Saint Elizabeths as soon as his head wound was stabilized. Soon after he was brought to Saint Elizabeths, he had a paranoid episode and had to be restrained. It wasn't clear whether his mental condition was the result of the gunshot wound,

his history of alcoholism, or both. In any case, after he got over the paranoid outburst, he had quieted down and become sly and secretive.

Matt thought that Harry's amnesia was at least in part an act, that he remembered more than he was telling.

"Despite what you may have learned from watching daytime soap operas," Matt said, "amnesia victims don't usually forget their whole lives and certainly not their names. Older memories are often intact, but events immediately before the traumatic brain injury come back slowly, sometimes not at all. That's why I thought our patient might recognize you if he had known you at all well. I thought the surprise of seeing someone out of his past might cause him to reveal how much of his amnesia is an act. That sort of secretiveness is not uncommon among paranoids."

Matt asked me if I could try to find out anything about Harry, what he had been doing lately, who his associates were, whether he had any family. Since Matt had no idea what Harry's recent life had been like, it was almost impossible for him to help.

Most of my Capitol Hill career, such as it is, has been spent as a Senate staffer, but at this time I was working on the House side, for a congressman from northern Virginia. The senators I'd worked for represented states in the Midwest and West, constituencies that were large, diverse, and, most of all, far away. A congressional district in northern Virginia, on the other

hand, was small, homogeneous, and right on the Capitol doorstep. That meant that we had a steady parade of constituents through the office and a full schedule of events in the district, as well as the end-of-the-session legislative crunch.

It wasn't until later that evening that I had the time to turn my attention again to Harry's situation. The congressman was out in Fairfax addressing a Rotary club, the rest of the staff had gone home for the day, and I didn't have anything else I had to do. So I ambled over to the Doorkeeper's office on the ground floor of the Capitol. A slight acquaintance of mine was an employee in the Doorkeeper's office, and a lot of the Doorkeeper's employees were oldtimers whose job it was to know who was who. Maybe someone there knew Harry and could tell me what he had been up to recently.

When I got there, three guys I didn't know were sitting around the anteroom shooting the breeze. They were probably doormen or other patronage employees.

"Is Artie around?" I asked.

The youngest of them stood, hitching up his pants. He was about fifty. "Naw. He's gone for the day. What can we do for you?"

"Do you think someone in the Doorkeeper's office might know Henry Bodger?" I asked, and I explained who he was.

"Never heard of him. Have you got a picture of him? Among the three of us we've got about a hundred years on the Hill. Maybe one of us will recognize him."

I took out a copy of Harry's driv-

er's license that Matt had blown up to double size. The picture was less than two inches square and grainy, but the likeness was good. The three of them gathered around. No one recognized the face, but the oldest, who was certainly eligible for Medicare, hesitated, started to speak, but then slowly shook his head.

"See someone familiar?" I asked.

"No," he said, handing the picture back to me.

I thought he might have something to say that he didn't want the others to hear. As I thanked them and said my goodbyes, I casually mentioned that I was off to have a bite to eat at the Hawk 'n' Dove, a restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue a few blocks east of the Capitol.

By eight o'clock, I was sitting at the bar. I'd polished off a small steak, some french fries, and a tossed salad and was working on my second scotch and water. The Doorkeeper's office had apparently been a washout, and I was trying to think of what to try next.

"I might be able to help you, Ross." It was the old fellow from the Doorkeeper's office. His name was Jimmy Beasley.

"What have you got, Jimmy?"

"The man in the picture . . . is he sometimes called Harry Butcher?"

"Usually," I said. "I called him Bodger because that's the name on the driver's license, not to mention his birth certificate, wherever that is. I thought that was probably the name he was going by these days."

"Maybe. When I knew him, it was Butcher."

"When was that?"

"Four or five years ago."

"Sit down and tell me about it. I'll buy you a drink."

He guffawed. "I don't think so. That's why I knew Harry. AA." I guessed that was also why he hadn't wanted to say anything in the office. Not all alcoholics like to tell the whole world about their problem.

I paid my tab, and Jimmy and I walked back up Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Capitol. As we walked, Jimmy told me about his experience with Harry Butcher.

"Harry was a hard case," he said. "He couldn't stick with the program. He started out pretty well, but after about three weeks he fell off the wagon. He missed meetings, went on a bender. He was very distrustful, wouldn't ask for help, wouldn't accept help..."

"What was he doing then? Did he have a job?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I don't think so. He said he was doing research, working on a book. He was ... secretive. That was part of his problem, that distrust. When you're doing the program, you have to lean on somebody sometimes. He couldn't ... or wouldn't."

"Do you know if he had any family?"

"No."

"Was he friendly with anybody in your AA group?"

"No ... well, maybe one guy. They weren't exactly friendly, but they had some sort of history together." I waited; he stopped and stared off into the distance for a while. "I think they had worked together on

some sort of job. PR or something." We resumed walking.

"That was his line of work. Do you happen to remember his name, the friend?"

"No ... wait. An odd name. A nickname. Yeah. Dub. His initials were W. W., but he went by Dub for short."

"Do you remember his last name?"

"No. Another W, I think."

"Why do you think he and Harry had known each other?"

"Oh, they had a kind of a blowup, a shouting match. The last meeting either of them came to, I think."

"What was it about, the fight?"

"It wasn't a fight exactly, just yelling. It was crazy. I couldn't make any sense of it. Something political, about some sort of secret society or something."

"Secret society?" We stopped again. We had reached the intersection of Pennsylvania and Independence, near the Library of Congress complex.

"Well, maybe not secret but something like the John Birch Society or the W. E. B. Du Bois Society—neither of those, but the Somebody's Name Society."

"And you don't remember the name?"

"No."

We parted. He turned left on Second Street and headed toward the Metro station. I thought about going back to my office in the Cannon Building but then thought better of it. I went home.

The next morning I was meeting with a group of the congressman's

constituents who were concerned about defense cutbacks with the end of the cold war. They were concerned mostly because their livelihoods depended upon Pentagon contracts. I would have suggested that they beat their swords into plowshares, but agriculture wasn't doing all that well either.

Then I got a telephone call that gave me an excuse to turn the constituents over to Tom Wilson, the congressman's legislative assistant. The call was from Matt Reynolds. Harry had bugged out, skipped. "Don't you have any security in that place?" I asked.

"Sure, but Harry wasn't a danger to himself or others. He wasn't charged with any crime. Where he was, security was minimal."

I told him what I'd learned from Jimmy Beasley, which was as minimal as the security at St. E's.

"That's interesting," Matt said. "During that paranoid episode he had when he was first here, he raved about some sort of society. The Prester John Society, I think he said."

"Prester John?"

"Yes. A medieval legend, a mythical Christian king in Abyssinia."

"Yeah, I know—but not necessarily Abyssinia. The East. The medieval grasp of geography was tentative, at best."

"You're the liberal arts major. I'll take your word for it."

"I've never heard of that society. What did he say about it?"

"Oh, I can't remember. Some sort of elaborate political plot. It was plainly a paranoid delusion."

We hung up with mutual prom-

ises to get together again soon. Before returning to my work I put in a call to the Congressional Research Service at the Library of Congress with a query about the Prester John Society. In my thirty-odd years in Washington, I had come to regard myself as something of a connoisseur of political conspiracy theories, both current and historical, left and right. But I had never before heard of the Prester John Society.

The rest of my day was uneventful. The congressman had another speaking engagement in the district that evening and left the office early. I spent the afternoon catching up on correspondence. Around closing time, a thick, brown envelope came from the CRS in response to my query. The cover memo said that they had found no references to the society but they were enclosing information on Prester John. I repacked the envelope and set it aside to look at after I got home.

I lived in a house that was too big for me on Mass. Ave. NE between Tenth and Eleventh. It was a three bedroom townhouse with a basement apartment that was currently unoccupied. I had bought the place for next to nothing in 1968, shortly after the riots attendant upon the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. A People's drugstore just across the street and a High's dairy store around the corner on Eleventh had been torched, and a lot of the residents of the neighborhood wanted out. But in a few years, as the memory of the disaster faded, gentrification of the

area resumed until I could barely afford to pay the property taxes on the place.

Home sweet home, I thought, as I mounted the cast-iron steps to the front door. I opened the door and picked up the mail on the floor of the entry hall. Bills. Junk.

On my way home I'd picked up some kung pao chicken and fried rice at the Quik Wok, a Chinese carry-out down the block. I put the mail and the food on the dining room table and went to the kitchen for a plate, some utensils, and a beer. Then I served up some rice and chicken, sprinkled it with soy sauce from a plastic packet, and, while I ate, went through the material on Prester John.

There were a couple of encyclopedia articles, excerpts from some medieval works including *The Travels of Marco Polo* and *The Voyage and Travels of Sir John Mandeville, Knight*, excerpts from more modern works such as a history of the explorations of Vasco da Gama, and a bibliography of works that touched on the subject in one way or another. The gist of all this was that Prester John was a legendary Christian priest and monarch in the East. In the course of time the presumed location of his realm seems to have drifted farther and farther to the West. According to Marco Polo, the realm of Prester John was north of Peking (or Beijing—Khan-balik, Marco called it). Chinghiz Khan (Ghengis Khan) waged war against Prester John, and "In this battle Prester John was killed," Marco said.

Later his realm was thought to

be in India, but medieval geography being what it was, India was often confused with Ethiopia—a confusion that went back at least to the time of Virgil. But since Coptic Christians inhabited Ethiopia from an early date (and predominated there by the fifteenth century), it must have seemed logical that that was Prester John's domain.

I laid the CRS file aside, feeling no more enlightened about Harry's problems than I had been to start with. I cleared the table and put the leftovers in the refrigerator. I was about to go upstairs to read for a while when I heard a light tapping on the glass of the back door. I didn't have much of a back yard. It was barely big enough for an air-conditioning unit and two trash barrels and was enclosed by an eight foot fence with a gate that opened onto an alley running behind the house. Guests didn't come in through the back door.

I turned on the light over the back stoop and saw, pressed against the glass of the door, the face of Harry Butcher. I opened the door. He was wearing a baggy tweed jacket, a plaid sport shirt, and a pair of khaki trousers that were about two inches too snug around the middle.

"Come on in, Harry." He limped over to the dining room table and slumped into a chair. "Have a seat," I said. "Would you like something to eat? I've got some leftover kung pao chicken."

He froze for a moment, then shook his head. I waited.

"Ross," he said, "you've got to hide me out."

"Hide you out?"

"They . . . they're . . . after me. Tried to kill me." He looked at his shoes.

"Who? Who's after you?"

He couldn't be completely crazy. He seemed to know how crazy what he was going to say would sound. He had at least that much grasp of reality. He shook his head as if trying to clear it and began.

The story he told, of course, was a paranoid fantasy, but not one I had ever heard before. Nothing about UFO's, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Tri-lateral Commission, the Illuminati, or any of the usual villains involved in various combinations in massive international or intergalactic conspiracies. He did manage to weave the JFK assassination and Watergate into his tale, but what Washington story doesn't nowadays?

According to Harry, he was being pursued by a Chinese secret society that he referred to variously as the White Tong, the Christian Soldiers Triad, or the Prester John Society. The group, he said, was formed many years ago by Americans, mostly the children of missionaries who had grown up in China. This founding group included such luminaries as Henry Luce and Pearl S. Buck. The catalyst in the formation of the group was Charlie Soong, an American-educated Methodist missionary who became very wealthy as a Bible publisher.

Soong was an early supporter of Sun Yat-sen in his revolution against the Manchu dynasty and rallied the Chinese secret societies to Sun's cause. Secret societies had

been a fact of Chinese life for a long time, but they came most forcefully upon Western consciousness in 1900 during an uprising against Western influence by a society called the Fists of Harmony and Justice, better known to the history books as the Boxers. There were many other secret societies, or triads, which varied in emphasis from spiritual to political to criminal.

It occurred to Charlie Soong that the many Western residents in China could form their own secret society and work to the advantage of Sun's revolution. Thus, the Prester John Society was born. When Sun died in 1925, the leadership of the Kuomintang party (KMT) eventually was taken over by Chiang Kai-shek, who, like Sun Yat-sen, was a son-in-law of Charlie Soong. According to Harry, it was pressure from Henry Luce and the Prester John Society that forced Chiang to purge the communists from the KMT.

During World War II the society's ranks expanded with the addition of U.S. military men and journalists with experience in China like General Claire Chennault, the leader of the famed Flying Tigers, and Joseph Alsop. Among those pointedly not recruited were General Joseph Stilwell and Theodore H. White, *Time's* correspondent in China, because of their well-known opposition to Chiang Kai-shek.

Harry had obviously told this story before. Sitting at the table, gazing at his folded hands, he told it without halting or stumbling. He never looked up to see my reaction, which wouldn't have told him much

anyway. After all that time as a Capitol Hill staffer, I had perfected a poker face to respond to all manner of nonsense.

"Harry," I said. He kept talking. "Harry!"

He looked up, frowning. "What?"

"Harry, what is the difference between this Prester John Society and what we always called the China Lobby?"

He looked puzzled. The question had thrown him off his stride. "China Lobby? Useful idiots!" He made a gesture of dismissal.

"Useful? To whom?"

"To the society. They pulled the strings, the China Lobby jumped."

"Simple as that, huh?"

"Yes!" He slammed the table with the flat of his hand. "Didn't you ever wonder what happened to the so-called China Lobby after Nixon opened relations with the People's Republic?"

"No. There were still plenty of supporters of Taiwan around."

"But they had no organization, no direction! Just private economic interests, sometimes in conflict with one another."

"Then what happened to the society? I mean, why did they lose their sense of direction?"

"In 1967 Henry Luce died. Four years later, T. V. Soong, Charlie Soong's son, also died. If either of them had still been alive, Nixon couldn't have made his opening to China. But with both of them gone, there was a power vacuum at the top of the society. Briefly, Joe Alsop, one of the most senior members, was at the top of the organization, but other more influential—and

wealthier—members eased him out."

"Who?"

"Oh, no one you would know. Entrepreneurs. Traders. You see the line of development? First the members were sons and daughters of missionaries, like Luce and Buck, who were reared in China. The next members came from among the military and journalists who were in China during the war, like Chennault and Alsop. But since the war the phenomenal economic growth around the Pacific Rim has drawn more and more traders and money men, not only to Nationalist China—Taiwan—but to all of east Asia, and some of them have found their way into the society."

"By 1970 Chiang was over eighty and Mao was only a few years younger," Harry continued with a faraway look in his eye. "It was obvious that the old guard was soon going to pass from the scene, and the entrepreneurs in the society began looking at the PRC, not so much as the enemy but as potentially the biggest market on the face of the earth."

According to Harry, the fine hand of the Prester John Society could be detected behind most events of Asian history since World War II. Their influence in China itself was blocked by the iron fist of Chairman Mao, but even Mao's most disastrous policies—The Great Leap Forward and later The Cultural Revolution—were intended to counter the society's influence. The rest of Asia was their game board. They had engineered the election-rigging scandals that brought down

Syngman Rhee in South Korea. They had told Sukarno when it was time to go and had installed Suharto in power in Indonesia, averting a full-scale civil war. They backed Souvanna Phouma against Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao in Laos. They installed Ngo Dinh Diem in power in South Vietnam, and when he no longer served their purposes, they had him assassinated. In short, the Prester John Society was responsible for a lot of things often attributed to the CIA.

"Okay, but what do these people have against you?" I asked. Harry turned to me, looking vaguely startled.

"I thought that should be obvious. I know about them—their existence, their power, their influence. I was writing a book—" He slumped and looked as though he were on the verge of tears.

"Listen, Harry," I said. "It's getting late. I've got a furnished apartment in the basement. You can stay there, and in the morning we'll call Dr. Reynolds . . ."

"No! Nobody can know where I am!"

"Let's talk about it in the morning."

In the morning, I went downstairs to look in on Harry. He was gone. I looked around the sparsely furnished apartment. The bed was unmade and had apparently been slept in. The only other indication that Harry had been there was the empty pint whisky bottle on the counter in the kitchenette. He must have had it concealed in one of the pockets of his capacious tweed jack-

et. I had scrupulously not offered him anything alcoholic to drink.

I called Matt Reynolds from the office. He was surprised that Harry had shown up at my house, less surprised that he had left the next morning before I had a chance to talk to him again. "I expect he'll come back here or turn up at some other hospital within the next twenty-four hours," Matt said.

"If he comes back to my place, I'll give you a call," I promised.

I got back to work, which at that moment meant tinkering with a floor speech the congressman was giving during special orders the next day. I hadn't got very far when the intercom buzzed. "There's a Dr. Matthew Reynolds on three," the receptionist said.

I punched three. "That was quick. Has our rambling boy come home again?"

"Not exactly," Matt said. "I just got a call from the D.C. police. Harry was found dead in Rock Creek Park, just off Connecticut Ave. The only identification he had on him was his hospital bracelet, so they called us."

"Did they say what happened to him?"

"They weren't certain of the cause of death, but he had been roughed up. Could've been mugged. It happens around there sometimes."

Yeah, I thought, but why was he around there? "Matt, from what Harry was telling me last night, that's the last place in town I would expect to find him. It couldn't be more than a quarter mile from the Chinese embassy."

That evening at home I was visited by the D.C. police, two homicide detectives who were working on the Henry Bodger case. They were an oddly assorted pair. The older one, Hollis, was heavysset, balding, and probably near retirement. The younger, Washington, was slim, intense, and impatient with his partner.

Matt had told them that Harry had stayed at my place the night before. I showed them the basement apartment where Harry had slept. Hollis questioned me while Washington searched it.

"Mr. Ward, have you known the victim long?"

"I first met him more than twenty years ago, but I hadn't seen him for a long time. I have no idea what he's been up to lately."

"Really? Then what did y'all talk about when he visited you last night?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that. I didn't want to have to repeat Harry's half-baked conspiracy theories. I didn't think I could do it without sounding crazy myself. So I said vaguely, "We talked about his problems."

"Which were ..."

"Well, Matt Reynolds could probably tell you more about that than I could. As I understand it, he had tried to kill himself. He was suffering from alcohol-induced paranoia ..."

"Is this his?" Washington asked, holding up the empty whisky bottle, which had been sitting on the counter in the kitchenette.

"Yeah," I answered.

"So, you two were drinking?" Hollis asked.

"No."

"No? The whisky went somewhere."

"Down his gullet, no doubt, but not while I was watching."

"Did he tell you what his plans were for today?"

"No. When we turned in, I said we'd talk again in the morning. But when I looked in this morning, he was gone."

"Not much here," Washington said. "Do you have a key to the file drawer of that desk in the bedroom?"

"It should be in the center drawer."

"It's not."

"Well, then it could be anywhere. I haven't used that desk in years. The tenant who used to live here might have walked off with it."

"It's probably not important. Seems Bodger was traveling light," Washington observed. "The few personal effects he had, he left at the hospital. What about that pad by the telephone? Are those his doodles or yours?"

"I don't know. Let me see."

Washington showed me the pad with a doodle on it:



"It's not mine," I said.

They asked me a few more questions that I didn't have answers to, and Hollis gave me his card and said to call if I thought of anything that might be helpful. I said I would

but didn't believe anything I could think of would be of any use. They weren't knocking themselves out. After all, what was Harry? A fugitive from the nuthouse who went and got himself mugged. They didn't show any further interest in the key to the desk, and they didn't take the pad with the doodle on it.

I may not be a professional investigator, but when I thought about it, those things looked like clues to me. To start with, if Harry had been doodling on the pad beside the telephone, he might have been talking to somebody. And it must have been somebody he called himself because no one would have known how to call him here. So who was it?

There was one obvious way to find out. The phone had a redial button.

I lifted the receiver and punched the redial. On the other end, the phone rang five times and an answering machine picked up.

The next morning I was in the office early. The voice on the answering machine had simply announced the number I had reached and said to leave a message at the tone. I didn't leave a message, but I made a note of the phone number. In the office we had crisscross directories for the Washington metropolitan area, and I found that the phone number belonged to a William W. Williams at an address on Kalorama Road, only a few blocks from the Chinese embassy and the site where Harry's body was found.

William W. Williams. I thought about it. Could this be the "Dub"

that Jimmy Beasley remembered from the AA meetings, the one Harry had argued with?

I called Detective Hollis to tell him what I had discovered. He thanked me but said that Washington had tried the redial while he was searching the place. They had already interviewed Williams. The cops were more thorough than I had thought. Hollis was polite, but his tone conveyed his disdain for a dumb civilian who thought he was a jump ahead of the pros. Duly chastened, I vowed to stop playing detective and get back to my legislative work.

The vow lasted until the end of the business day, but as I walked home, I found myself thinking about Harry's doodle on the phone pad. It occurred to me that it might be a Chinese character, not just a random doodle. So I stopped in at the Quik Wok, the Chinese carry-out near my house where I often picked up something for dinner.

The proprietor, Mr. Wong, was standing behind the counter. Behind him Mrs. Wong was busily stir-frying at a row of woks on the stove. In the kitchen the Wong children were cutting vegetables.

"Mr. Wong, could you help me with something?"

"You bet, Mr. Ward. What you want?"

I took a napkin and drew as nearly as I could remember it the doodle Harry had left on the telephone pad. It was a clumsy reproduction, but it had the main features of the original.

"Here," I said, "is this a Chinese character?"

Mr. Wong studied the napkin for a moment.

"No," he answered. "Is maybe two characters." Mr. Wong took another napkin and drew much more skillfully than I had:



DUNG



SAI

"What do they mean?" I asked.

"Dung is . . . east, eastward; sai, west."

"So the two together mean . . . what? East-west? East and west?"

"You bet."

It made as much sense as anything else in this business. East and west—a symbol for the Prester John Society perhaps.

I ordered some sweet and sour pork and a couple of egg rolls and went home.

The autopsy revealed that the late Henry Bodger, a.k.a. Harry Butcher, had died of a "subdural hematoma." When he was mugged, his head wound reopened and bled into his brain.

Harry apparently had no living relatives, at least none that could be found. He had been married and divorced, I seemed to recall, sometime in the fifties. If his ex-wife could be traced, however, she probably wouldn't want to be. I knew that Harry had been in the navy in the closing days of World War II. So, using the minimal clout of the congressman's office and one of my own contacts at the Veteran's Ad-

ministration, I made arrangements for his burial in a national cemetery.

Matt and I went to the funeral together. It was not much of a ceremony. Besides Matt and me, Detective Hollis was nearby, probably watching to see who would show up. The chaplain from St. Elizabeths read the Twenty-third Psalm, prayed for the immortal soul of Henry Bodger, and placed the urn containing his mortal remains in a niche of the columbarium.

Alexandria National Cemetery is on Wilkes Street, only a few blocks from the heart of Old Town. After the funeral Matt and I went to lunch at the Hard Times Cafe, a chili parlor on King Street. We sat at a booth and ordered chili Texas style for me, Cincinnati for Matt.

"Not much of a turnout for the obsequies," Matt observed.

"More than it looked like. I spotted a pudgy, redhaired guy watching from a distance, and when I spoke to Hollis after the funeral, he said the guy was William W. Williams. He also pointed out a good-looking Oriental woman I hadn't noticed. Said he thought she was taking an interest in Harry as well."

"Sounds like something out of 'Terry and the Pirates'—Hot Shot Charlie and the Dragon Lady."

The food came, and we started to eat. "Matt," I said, changing the subject, "Harry was telling me about a book he was working on. Did he tell you about it? Did you ever see a manuscript?"

"He didn't have a manuscript with him when he was brought to

the hospital, but I frequently saw him scribbling in a notebook, one of those composition books like school kids use."

"Did you ever see what he was writing?"

"No. He was very secretive."

"Is the notebook still among his personal effects at the hospital?"

"I'd have to look."

"Do, and let me know."

"What do you expect to find?"

"I don't know. You're the psychologist. You tell me—is there any chance that there was something behind Harry's paranoid ravings?"

"None at all. But I wonder about you. You want his notebook. You're asking about his manuscript. What do you expect to find? Evidence for his conspiracy theories?"

"No . . . maybe . . . I don't know. Look, the guy was murdered. Then at his funeral what happens? These mysterious strangers are lurking around. What do you make of it?"

"Nothing. Besides, Williams wasn't exactly a stranger."

"No. William W. Williams was the person Harry had called just before he was killed. And the Oriental woman, I don't know who she was, but we do know he thought he was being pursued by a Chinese gang . . ."

"Not exactly. It was supposed to be a gang of missionaries who were Old China Hands."

"Right . . . well . . . just see if he left his notebook at the hospital."

Harry was dead and buried, or actually inurned and shelved. The police were on the case. So why did

I still feel there was something I should do? Was there something that I was forgetting? Or was it because Dub and The Dragon Lady had been lurking at Harry's funeral? And come to think of it, why *had* they been lurking? I pondered these questions as I walked home from the Union Station Metro stop.

Opening my front door I found a worse mess than usual. Somebody had broken in and trashed the place. They came in through the back door by bashing one of my galvanized steel trash cans into the glass. Whoever had done the job was not subtle. I didn't have much furniture, but much of what I had would have to be replaced. Sofa and chair cushions had been slit open and their stuffing scattered. Drawers from the sideboard had been pulled all the way out and their contents rifled. Everything in the kitchen cabinets and drawers had been dumped in the middle of the kitchen floor.

Upstairs, things were no better. My bedroom and office had been thoroughly tossed. Even the back bedroom, which I had never bothered to furnish, had not escaped attention. Some loose floorboards had been torn up and a light fixture in the ceiling knocked down.

I called the cops.

In about an hour a couple of uniformed officers showed up, looked around, and took a report. Since no one had been hurt and, so far as I could tell, nothing had been stolen, the officers were ready to let the matter drop.

"You mean you're not going to investigate—you know, dust the place

for fingerprints, something like that?" I asked.

"No, sir. It's our experience that a break-in like this, it's usually just kids. They'll get caught sometime, in the act, but it's not worth the time or trouble to bring a forensic team in to investigate."

"But suppose this break-in is related to a more serious crime?"

"And what crime would that be, sir?"

"A murder. Henry Bodger. You might have read about it in the paper."

"No, sir. Why do you think this vandalism has anything to do with that murder?"

"Bodger was here the night before he was killed," I said, and the moment I said it I knew how flimsy it sounded. So did the officer. He smirked and assured me, as solemnly as he could, that he would see to it that Hollis and Washington got a copy of his report.

When the cops were gone and I was trying to straighten up the place, it occurred to me that whoever had made this mess was looking for something in particular. Not just for valuables like an antique silver service or the family jewels, but something specific. Something small enough to be hidden in a sofa cushion. Something like the manuscript of the book that Harry was allegedly writing?

I went down to have a look at the basement apartment. It hadn't been vandalized. Either the vandals didn't know that Harry had stayed in the apartment, or they weren't looking for Harry's manuscript as I suspected. What else

could they be looking for? Of course the cop could be right. It could have been kids who figured there was no point in vandalizing a school, since all of them looked like they had been vandalized already.

I wandered through the apartment, and then I saw the desk in the bedroom. Detective Washington hadn't been able to find the key to the file drawer. I couldn't find it either. So I took a letter opener and jimmied the lock. There was nothing in the drawer. So what else would Washington have missed in his search?

I looked under the desk, between the mattress and box springs, under the bed. Nothing. I was searching more delicately than whoever had ransacked the upstairs but not any smarter. It would help to know what I was looking for. I looked at the small bookshelf beside the desk. It was filled with books, mostly paperback, some mine and some abandoned by my former tenant. Could something be hidden behind the books? I leaned the shelf forward, dumping the books on the floor. Nothing.

At least nothing that I saw immediately. I had started putting the books back on the shelf when I noticed that one of them, Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*, had a slip of paper as a bookmark. It was a receipt dated the day that Harry had shown up on my doorstep, and I hadn't looked at that book since the early 1970's. On the receipt was the name of a print shop and copy service. I knew the place. It was a hole-in-the-wall on Pennsylvania Avenue near the Eastern Market

Metro stop. So did Harry have something printed or copied? If it were a copy job, it was a big one. The amount on the receipt was over twenty dollars, tax included. That would be around four hundred copies at five cents apiece, the going rate at the time.

Since he was obviously not carrying almost a ream of paper when he came to see me, what had he done with it? I looked at the slip of paper. Could it be not merely a receipt but a claim check? Could Harry's print job be sitting at the copy shop waiting to be picked up?

The next day was Saturday and I wasn't expected at the office, so I strolled over to Eastern Market for a bite of breakfast on my way to the printer's to inquire about Harry's print job. Eastern Market was a farmers' market established in the early nineteenth century. The building standing today, a vast red brick barn at Seventh Street and North Carolina Avenue SE, was built in the 1870's. On weekends it still serves as a farmers' market and flea market with stalls, inside and out, selling produce, pottery, books, bagels, jewelry, and junk. I had a bagel and cup of coffee while I read the *Washington Post* and waited for the print shop to open.

The shop opened at ten o'clock. I walked through the door as soon as the proprietor unlocked it. I showed him the receipt. He looked at it and said, "Sure, that's been ready for several days now. I thought it had been forgotten. Hell, you know,

most jobs that come in here, people want 'em yesterday. Not often a finished job sits around all week."

He went to the back of the shop and came back with two ream-sized copy-paper boxes. "This one's the original," he said, indicating the box with a two inch square Post-it note on it saying "Original."

I'd never have guessed, I thought. But I said, "Thanks. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. The job was paid in advance. You want a bag to put that in?"

"Thanks," I said, and he put the two boxes in a plastic bag with the name of the shop on it.

I took my prize and settled down at a table at a sidewalk cafe across the street from Eastern Market. The early lunch crowd was starting to come into the cafe before I had finished skimming through Harry's manuscript, all four hundred pages of it. I was familiar with the substance of it in broad outline. It was a more detailed version of Harry's elaborate fantasy about the Prester John Society. It was impressive. Harry was a very good writer, and he made the most preposterous tale seem almost plausible. But who would kill Harry and ransack my house for this manuscript? Maybe no one. It could be that Harry was mugged and my house was vandalized and one had nothing to do with the other or with the manuscript. Life's like that. Not everything is connected. Sometimes it seems precious little is. Everything is absolute.

The next day I had eaten my din-

ner and washed the dishes and was about to settle in for a quiet evening at home, reading something that had nothing to do with politics, legislation, or Harry's problems. Then a knock came at the door. I looked through the peephole and saw a pudgy, fiftyish man with close-cropped, thinning red hair. He was wearing a slightly threadbare grey suit, no tie, and a blue button-down oxford cloth shirt. He didn't look dangerous. He didn't look like he was going to try to sell me insurance or magazine subscriptions. He did look like the guy Detective Hollis had pointed out at Harry's funeral as William W. Williams. So I opened the door.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Ward?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You don't know me," he said superfluously. "My name is William W. Williams. Friends call me 'Dub.' The police tell me that you talked to Harry Butcher the night before he died. That he spent the night here ..."

"Yes."

"May I come in?"

"Yes." My end of the conversation was uninspired.

I offered him a cup of coffee, and we sat at the kitchen table. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Well ..." He hesitated. "I ... uh ... I was wondering ... uh ... what you and Harry had been talking about."

"What do you think?" I asked. "What did he call you about?"

"Um ..." He hesitated again; then he seemed to make up his mind. "Okay. This is sort of complicated.

Let me explain. I used to be a foreign service officer in the State Department. I was an East Asia specialist. I knew Harry slightly in those days. He was doing public relations for some Taiwanese interests. We weren't especially close."

He paused, staring for a moment into his coffee cup. "Then I blew it," he continued. "Too many embassy parties ... no, I'm making excuses. The short version is, I became a drunk. I lost my job. I hit bottom.

"That's how I ran into Harry again. We were in the same AA group. Neither of us was really ready to quit. Anyhow, he was working on a book about U.S. relations with China, he said. He asked me to read the manuscript. It was ... nutty. Conspiracy theory stuff. I should have simply dismissed it out of hand, told him what I really thought.

"But I was irresponsible. I was a drunk. I decided to have some fun with Harry. Besides, I'd spent ten years in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs at State. Everybody there is particularly alive to conspiracies, for historical reasons that go back to the McCarthy era. One time I couldn't find the area fact book for China, and I jokingly asked, 'Who lost China?' Nobody laughed.

"I told him his theories were on target. I even added some new twists. I said I had inside information—that the 'W' of my middle name stood for Wedemeyer and I was Albert Wedemeyer's nephew."

"Who's Wedemeyer?" I asked.

"The general who was Vinegar Joe Stilwell's successor as commander in China during World War

II. Alsop and Chennault—on behalf of Chiang—had lobbied for Wedemeyer to replace Stilwell, so he fit right into Harry's crazy theories. I told him that 'Uncle Al' was a member of the 'White Tong,' and I added some details to the plot. It was easy for me, of course. I speak Mandarin, and I'm intimately familiar with the history and politics of China. In fact, I lived in Taiwan as a child. My father was with the Military Assistance and Advisory Group in Taipei . . .

"You aren't really Wedemeyer's nephew, are you?" I asked.

"Oh no. That was my idea of a joke."

"Okay. I get the picture," I said, "but what's the point of this story? What did Harry call you about?"

"When I realized how serious Harry was about all that conspiracy stuff, I told him I had been putting him on. He wouldn't believe me. We had a blowup over it at an AA meeting. That must have been five or six years ago. I stormed out, fell off the wagon, and never went back to AA.

"Harry hounded me. He wanted more 'inside information' on the Prester John Society. I left town, took my meager savings and checked into a dry-out clinic. Since then I've been sober, mostly. I've put my life back together. For a while I taught history at a junior college in West Virginia, and on my own I started to get back into East Asian studies. I've written a couple of articles . . ."

"Great. But what does any of this have to do with anything. What are you here for?"

"I'm getting to that. A year ago I moved back to Washington. I have no illusions about going back to work in the State Department, but I do want to make the best use of my background and education. I have done some freelance research work for some think tanks, and now I'm in line to become a fellow at one of them, the Pacific Rim Institute.

"But Harry apparently never stopped looking for me. A few days ago he found me. Not that I was hiding. I'm listed in the phone book. He called me—apparently from here, your phone. I agreed to see him the next morning. He never showed up."

"Okay. But I still don't see what you want from me."

"Well, I agreed to see Harry because I wanted to talk him out of continuing to work on his . . . manuscript, to tell him that I would deny that I'd ever told him all those crazy things. I couldn't afford for him to publish it—or even to circulate that crazy document among people in the field.

"Anyhow," he continued, "what I wanted to ask you was whether he said anything about his manuscript, what he had done with it?"

"No." He waited to see if I would say anything more informative. I wasn't inclined to. He didn't look like someone who would trash my place, and then, when he didn't find what he was looking for, come back, hat in hand, and ask for what he couldn't steal, but . . .

"You didn't happen to come by yesterday when I wasn't here?"

He looked at me quizzically.

"No. Why?"

"Somebody turned the place inside out. I thought they might have been looking for Harry's manuscript, like you."

A funny thing happened. He blanched. I don't think I'd ever seen anyone blanch, although people do it in books all the time. His already pale face suddenly became a whiter shade of pale, and fear flickered in his eyes. He stood and, without ceremony, abruptly took his leave. I could barely keep up with him in his race to the front door. I followed him out and stood on the stoop watching him dash down the street to his Chevy Caprice.

I wondered how closely the police had looked into William W. Williams' story. What he'd told me certainly sounded like a motive for murder. Here's a guy who's got his life back together, has prospects of resuming his career, and up pops this indiscretion out of his alcoholic past. Maybe he didn't even mean to kill Harry, but with his recent head injury, Harry was in a fragile state. Pushing him around a little or shaking him might've been enough.

I should probably call the police, I thought, to tell them about Williams' visit. And about the manuscript. The manuscript . . . now, that was an interesting problem. Where did it come from? According to Matt, Harry didn't have it at the hospital. So he must have picked it up somewhere and dropped it off at the printer between leaving the hospital and showing up on my doorstep. Where? Did he have an apartment or a room somewhere? Was he staying with someone be-

fore his suicide attempt, if it was a suicide attempt?

I called the D.C. Metro Police number and asked for Detective Hollis's extension. He was in, and he had received a copy of the report on the vandalizing of my house. He was no more impressed than the uniformed officer who had made the report. "Okay," I said, "try this. William W. Williams came here looking for a manuscript that he thinks could ruin his life just when he's getting it all back together again."

"You think Williams trashed your house?" Hollis asked.

"Maybe. You should have seen how he reacted when I suggested it."

"So, you think he's a B and E suspect, or is he a murderer, too?"

"Could be. He had a motive."

"He also had one hell of an alibi."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"He was under FBI surveillance at the time of the murder."

Ordinarily I wouldn't expect a cop to tell me much about an ongoing investigation, but Detective Hollis's situation wasn't ordinary. He was a short-timer, due to retire in two months. He was miffed at the FBI, not just because of this case but because of the "high-handedness" he felt he had suffered from the Bureau throughout his career. And besides, he didn't give a damn about the Bureau's case, which had nothing to do with the murder he was investigating. It seemed the FBI was following a "cultural attaché" from the Chinese embassy whom they had identified as a spy,

and the spy was seen with William W. Williams around the time Harry was mugged.

Williams was the only lead that Hollis had. He freely vented his frustration with the FBI for knocking his investigation into a cocked hat by ruling out a suspect. He was so worked up, bending my ear about his problems, that I neglected to mention that I had Harry's manuscript.

I wasn't interested in Hollis's feud with the Feds, and I wasn't as sure as he appeared to be that the spy business had nothing to do with the murder. I thought Harry's Chinese conspiracy theories had something to do with the case, but I didn't know what.

I was determined to figure it out. I had been put to some substantial inconvenience and expense, not to mention that queasy feeling of personal violation that you get when your home is burglarized. So what did I know? Harry was murdered, or at least found, somewhere between the Chinese Embassy and William W. Williams' apartment. He had talked to Williams by phone from my house. He left the claim check for his manuscript at my house. Someone had torn up my house looking for something, possibly the manuscript.

I didn't know much, and what I knew suggested more questions than answers. For example, who tore up my place? Williams? Chinese spies? Or was there some third interested party that I didn't know about? And why was a Chinese spy hanging around with Williams?

The doorbell rang. I checked the peephole, and there was Williams, standing too close to the door and looking nervous. It was getting late, and I was in no mood for company. I opened the door a crack to tell him to go away. Williams, pushed from behind, burst through the door. He knocked me flat on my back and landed on top of me. A man holding a gun came in behind him and shut the door.

"I believe you have something of mine or know where it is," the gunman said.

Williams rolled off me and sat with his head in his hands. I pushed myself to my feet, still slightly dazed. I had whacked the floor pretty hard with my head.

"I think I got a concussion," I said.

"You're getting worse than that if you don't come across with the book."

"Book? What book?"

"Harry Butcher's book."

"The manuscript?"

"Yeah. Okay. Manuscript. Hand it over."

"What makes you think I have it?"

He rolled his eyes and thrust the pistol toward me. My question was too dumb to answer. I got the message.

"It's upstairs," I said. I figured it wasn't worth dying for. And besides, I had two copies. The gunman herded me and Williams up the stairs, the pistol nudging me in the small of the back. One copy of the manuscript was sitting in the middle of my desk. The second one was in its box on the floor. I went directly to the copy on the desk and studious-

ly avoided even looking in the direction of the other copy. I put the manuscript back in its own box and handed it over. The gunman tucked it under his arm and left. His footsteps clattered down the stairs, the door slammed, and he was gone.

I rushed to the front bedroom to see if I could spot his car out the window, but there was no sign of him. When I looked around, Williams was heading toward the stairs. "Hey! Wait!" I shouted. He dashed down the stairs. I was right behind him and grabbed him by the collar before he got to the front door. "Let's talk," I said, dragging him into the living room and shoving him down on the sofa.

He sat with his head thrown back, staring at the ceiling. "Who was that?" I asked.

"That?" He chuckled and shook his head. "That was Harry's ... publisher." He guffawed.

"Publisher?" I knew the book business was tough, but I didn't think publishers went around grabbing manuscripts at gunpoint. "I think I need a drink."

"Me too."

"You're on the wagon," I reminded him.

"What's the point? My future as a Sinologist just walked out the front door."

I went over to the liquor cabinet, keeping one eye on Williams, who didn't seem inclined to move any more. I took out a bottle of scotch and two glasses. Why not? Maybe I could ply him with liquor and get some answers. I poured a liberal two fingers of whisky in each glass and handed him one.

"You got ice?" he asked.

"No." I did, but I wasn't going to leave him while I went to the kitchen and cracked a tray.

He took a slug of his drink, made a face, and shuddered. "Smooth," he said hoarsely.

"Okay, so it's not Chivas Regal. Get used to it."

He finished it off in another belt. He was getting used to it. I poured some more.

"What did you mean about your 'career as a Sinologist' being over?" I asked.

"When Harry's book is published, I'll be a laughingstock. Nobody will hire me."

"You mean that ... that thug really was a publisher?"

"Yeah. Crackpot Publishing, Inc. He's Davis Fischer, the head of a nut group. Underground Patriots, Patriotic Underground, something like that."

"I think I've heard of them. He was a Vietnam vet or something?"

"More than that, a true believer. When the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam, he thought it was treasonous, a betrayal of the Vietnamese, of his fallen comrades, of American history, of Mom, hot dogs, apple pie, everything. He sought out like-minded citizens, mostly other vets at first, and formed his organization. Their purpose was to expose and root out those responsible for the betrayal and to ensure that nothing like it would ever happen again."

"Right. And over the years the membership grew and the point of the organization broadened to a general anti-government appeal. More people and more money. But

what does any of this have to do with Harry and his half-baked ideas?"

"Money was the main thing. Not only had Fischer's organization grown, it had become part of a network of paranoid political organizations, all those outfits that see conspiracies under every rock, those who get all agitated about Bilderbergers, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Tri-Lateral Commission, the New World Order, the Federal Reserve, black helicopters, or whatever."

"Right-wingers?"

Williams shook his head. "The usual labels don't apply. These guys are out there beyond the edge, where right meets left. Anyhow, there are more of these characters than you'd like to think. And as you know, Harry was chronically hard up for money, like most drunks who can't hold a job. So he took his cock-amamie theories to Davis Fischer in search of cash. To make it even more attractive to Fischer, he pointed out that the abandonment of Vietnam followed close upon Nixon's rapprochement with China.

"Fischer advanced a few thousand to Harry, and Harry agreed to let Fischer's organization publish the book. Harry, of course, wanted a real publisher, but he couldn't find one interested enough to pay him an advance." He paused and held up his glass for more whisky. I poured a generous slug in his glass and continued to nurse my first drink.

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

He stared into the amber liquid

in his glass as if looking there for an answer. "Harry told me. When he called me from here . . ." His voice trailed off. He drained his glass. The whisky was starting to kick in. It doesn't take much when you're out of training like Williams.

"Do you think Fischer killed Harry?" I asked. Williams shook his head and stared at his empty glass. Plying him with liquor wasn't working. It looked as if he might fall asleep before he waxed talkative. As a detective I was a flop.

Since I wasn't getting anywhere asking about Harry's murder, I decided to change the subject.

"Why is the FBI following you around?" I asked. That woke him up. His jaw dropped and his eyes bugged out, but he didn't say anything. He reached for the whisky bottle without asking and poured himself a drink stiff enough to stun an elephant. I didn't think it was an act. He was genuinely surprised. "Okay," I said, "who is the Chinese spy you hang around with?" I told him about the woman who had been at Harry's funeral.

"Wang Li? Was she at the funeral? She's a cultural attaché at the PRC embassy. I interviewed her some weeks ago for an article I was working on. A gorgeous girl. After the interview I asked her out."

"And the FBI was following her because they think she's a spy?"

"She may be. That could be why she went out with me. A lot of embassy officials do a little intelligence gathering. Chinese spying isn't like the James Bond stuff. They get to know people in the Chinese community, pick up a meaningless item

of information here, another bit there, 'a thousand grains of sand,' they say. It's slow, but in time it all adds up to something useful."

"What did you talk to her about?"

"Cultural matters. Ballet. Opera."

"Did you mention Harry and his theories?"

He paused and took a belt of his drink. "I... No!... I might've... jokingly. I don't know..."

Great, I thought, maybe Dub's five-year-old drunken joke has blossomed into murder, armed robbery, and a potential international incident.

I left Williams on the sofa where he passed out, and in the morning, I tossed him out of the house before I left for work. He was hungover and a little wobbly on his pins but no worse than that. Unlike Williams I hadn't had much to drink, but we had stayed up too late and I had a headache. It made for a long day at the office. Fortunately I didn't have to do anything that required deep or original thought. I got through the day by promising myself that I would go home immediately after work and lie down.

For once, I did as I had promised myself. I lay there, staring at the ceiling, but I couldn't sleep. There was something I had meant to look into but had forgotten. What? Something about the night Harry had showed up at my house... The manuscript. Where was it? He hadn't had it at the hospital. He hadn't had it when I saw him. Between the time he left the hospital and

when he showed up here he had to retrieve it from somewhere and leave it at the print shop to be copied.

Had I overlooked some clue that could answer my question? I went to the middle bedroom where my desk was and set the box with the remaining copy of Harry's opus on the desk. The yellow Post-it note marked "Original" was stuck to the top. I realized that I hadn't even looked at this copy. I took the pages out of the box and fanned through them to see if I'd missed anything.

A slip of paper dropped out. Written on it was "80 pp @ \$2.25/p = \$180." I examined the paper. It was personal stationery with the name ARLENE NELSON embossed across the top. Who was Arlene Nelson? I looked in the Greater Washington Area phone book. There were lots of Nelsons but no Arlene. I wasn't going to find her in the phone book.

So who was she? She was billing Harry for something. Typing maybe? Eighty pages was only about twenty percent of Harry's book. Could Arlene have been doing the typing job in installments? I thought I'd like to ask her, but how do you find a typist if all you know is her name? There must be thousands of people in the Washington area who do freelance typing jobs.

I resolved to sleep on the problem and, if nothing more promising occurred to me, to pass the name along to the police. Maybe Hollis would be interested. Anyhow, he had resources I didn't have for finding Arlene Nelson.

Later in the week Matt Reynolds

called me at the office. Harry's notebook had turned up. Another patient, who was famous for his sticky fingers, had it. He swore that Harry had given it to him, although he couldn't explain why and nobody believed him anyhow. "I've looked it over," said Matt, "and I don't know why Harry would want it, let alone anyone else."

"Why? What's in it?"

"Nothing much. Doodles. Henscratching. Lists of names, things to do. The notebook is less than half full."

"I'd like to see it."

"I think I'd better turn it over to the police."

"Yeah. Well, can't you hang onto it for a while?"

He had already called the police, and Hollis had said he would be by for it in the afternoon. "But," said Matt, "buy me lunch, and I'll bring the notebook along."

We had lunch at Hogate's, a seafood place on the waterfront in southwest Washington. We ordered crab cakes. If Washington has a regional cuisine, it includes crab cakes, and Hogate's is a pretty good place to get them.

While we waited for our food, I examined Harry's notebook. It was an ordinary composition notebook like kids use in school with a black marbled cover and a hundred lined sheets of paper inside. The contents were much as Matt had described—a jumble of cryptic notes, lists, and doodles, some of which looked like Chinese characters. But the handwriting was smaller and neater than I would have expected. Not what I would have called hen-

scratching. One of the lists was names and telephone numbers, and one of the names was Arlene. I copied down the telephone number next to the name, and handed the notebook back to Matt. "There may be something there," I said, "for someone who has the time to figure it out."

"You apparently found something of interest," Matt said. "What did you copy down?"

I told him about the slip I'd found with Arlene Nelson's name on it. "Do you know who she is?" I asked. "Did Harry ever mention her?" Before he could answer, our crab cakes arrived. We dug in.

After a few bites Matt said, "Don't you think you ought to tell the police about that, about Arlene?"

"You're going to see Hollis this afternoon when he picks up the notebook. You tell him."

"Ross, you haven't even told the police that you have the manuscript yet. I don't think they'll be too happy with you..."

I interrupted him. "You don't know the half of what I haven't told them." I described my encounter with Davis Fischer. He whistled low and slow. We ate the rest of our lunch in silence.

After lunch Matt offered me a ride back to the Hill. He had driven; I'd come on the Metro. I thanked him but said that the walk to the Metro stop would be good for me.

"Ross," he said, "you don't have a clue what's good for you. If you did, you would stop concealing evidence and trying to play detective and let the professionals do their job." I was

surprised at the exasperation in his tone. I considered what he said.

"I guess this means I can expect Detective Hollis to come calling this afternoon?" I suggested.

"Hollis can do what he wants, but you can be damned sure I'm going to tell him what you told me."

"Do what you like," I said. "You're not sworn to secrecy."

I found an excuse to drive out to Fairfax and spend the afternoon at my boss's district office so that, when Hollis came looking for me, I would be harder to find. In the late afternoon I called the Capitol Hill office to see if there were any messages. There were some calls but nothing from Hollis. I was surprised. I really thought he would come after me.

After six o'clock, when most of the office staff had gone home, I decided to give Arlene Nelson a call. I dialed the number that I had found in Harry's notebook. It rang five times before a recording picked up. The pleasant female voice identified the number I had reached as the Georgetown University history department.

Over the years I'd had some contact with Georgetown University, and I even had a friend in the history department. Three or four years ago I had taken part in a panel discussion put on by a Washington think tank. Also on the panel was Doris Feldman, an associate professor of history at Georgetown. Since then I'd been a guest speaker in her classes a few times, and we got together for lunch whenever she happened to be on the Hill or

I happened to be in Georgetown. I called Doris's office number and got no response, not even an answering machine. A call to her home number brought the same result.

The next day was Saturday. Detective Hollis still had made no effort to get in touch with me, at least none that I had heard about. Maybe Matt had changed his mind and didn't rat on me.

After I made myself some coffee and had a bite of breakfast, I tried Doris Feldman again. She wasn't at home, so I tried her office. She answered on the third ring. We exchanged the usual small talk, and then I told her I was trying to get in touch with Arlene Nelson.

"Why?" she asked. "Are you looking for someone to type your autobiography?" As a specialist in political history Doris thought my autobiography would be interesting. It was kind of a running joke between us. Whenever I told her a funny story about some politician I'd known, she'd urge me to write my memoirs. Of course, no ordinary civilian would pay a nickel to read such a book, even if I had the time and inclination to write it.

"Not yet," I said. "It's kind of a long story..."

"What the heck, it's Saturday morning. I've got all weekend."

I didn't feel like spending all weekend, or even twenty or thirty minutes, on the telephone. So I offered to buy her lunch and tell my story then. She suggested the American Cafe in Georgetown at twelve thirty.

No sooner had I hung up the

phone than there came a knock at the door. Looking through the peephole, I saw . . . nothing. Something was blocking the hole. The rapping on the door came again, harder than before, and a familiar voice said, "Open up, Ward. I know you're in there."

I opened the door. "Detective Hollis, what a surprise."

"I'll bet. I ought to run you in for concealing evidence . . ."

"Who? Me?"

"... but instead I'm going to take the evidence off your hands."

"Do you have a warrant?"

"Don't make this difficult. No. No warrant. I'm also supposed to ask if you want to press charges against Davis Fischer."

"Who?"

"Don't play dumb. I've talked at length to Dr. Reynolds. He was very forthcoming."

"He would be," I muttered.

"So, what about Fischer? He ransacked your house and came back and robbed you at gunpoint . . ."

"Yeah, yeah. No harm done. I'd be satisfied if he paid to have my sofa reupholstered."

"Whatever. I thought you'd like to know that we arrested him for Bodger's murder."

"Fischer? How . . ."

"Fischer had the manuscript he took from you and a notebook, a twin of the one that Reynolds gave us, with Bodger's writing in it. Apparently, after he left here, he went to Fischer to try to squeeze more money out of him. Fischer refused, demanded the manuscript, and roughed Bodger up a bit. Fischer claims Bodger was alive when he

left, but even if he was, it's pretty certain Fischer used him as a punching bag and that's what killed him."

I couldn't think of anything to say to that. So I got the other copy of the manuscript and handed it over to Hollis. He hadn't mentioned Arlene Nelson, but I included her receipt in the box with the manuscript anyway. It looked like the whole bizarre affair was over.

Since I had plenty of time, I got to the cafe early for my lunch with Doris. One of the peculiarities of the Washington subway system is that there is no stop in Georgetown. The snooty merchants and residents of the area didn't want it to be too easy for the hoi polloi to get there. But on a beautiful Saturday like this, nobody minded walking a few blocks from the Foggy Bottom or the Rosslyn Metro stop, and you could count on Georgetown's being wall-to-wall hoi polloi. If we wanted to have a table, it paid to get to the cafe early.

Doris arrived at twelve thirty on the dot. I was sitting at a table with a clear view of the front door, nursing a pint of Bass ale. Unlike many professors Doris usually dressed very stylishly, like the cabinet officer or senior White House aide she no doubt aspired to be someday. Today, however, she was dressed more like a graduate student—jeans, sneakers, and a Duke University T-shirt. It was, after all, Saturday afternoon.

"I see you dressed down for the occasion," I said, standing and sliding back a chair for her.

"Thanks for noticing," she said, pecking a kiss in the direction of my cheek as she slipped into the chair.

We ordered lunch, and Doris started going on about some project she was working on. I interrupted her. "Aren't you the least bit curious about why I called this meeting?"

"Ah yes. Something about Arlene? And I thought that was just an excuse for you to seek the pleasure of my company."

"I didn't know I needed an excuse for that."

"Of course you do. You're too much the politician to be direct about anything."

"You think of me as a politician only because I've worked for so many of them over the years. Let me prove you wrong." And I proceeded to tell her, as briefly and directly as I could, the saga of Harry Butcher and how I came to be asking after Arlene Nelson.

"Okay," Doris said, eyeing me skeptically, "exactly how much of that am I supposed to believe?"

"As much as you want. If I were making it up, I would try to make it funnier."

"That bit about a Chinese secret society made up of white missionaries would be pretty funny except that there are plenty of people who actually believe even sillier things. Anyhow, today is your lucky day. Arlene is in the office. You can come back to the campus with me."

It seemed that Arlene came in most Saturdays to use the history department's computer for her typing business. She'd been with the department for years and had made herself indispensable—a sentry

guarding access to distinguished professors, a surrogate mother to undergraduates, and a guardian angel to graduate students. She typed all the departmental correspondence in the course of her regular duties, and then, after hours and on weekends, she typed, at an economical rate of pay, students' theses and professors' books and articles. When the academic business slackened off, she advertised in the classifieds. That was probably how Harry found her.

Doris told me all this as we hiked across the campus. When we got to the history department, we found Arlene busily typing. Doris introduced me and, complaining that she had work to attend to, went on to her office.

Arlene was a middle-aged woman, about fifty, who had probably been "cute" in her youth—short, buxom, sprightly, a cheerleader type. Age had faded her, but even now a sparkle came into her eyes when she flashed a smile. She graced me with such a smile as she said, "As you can see, I have some work to do, too."

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," I apologized, "but did you know Henry Bodger, or, as he was sometimes known, Harry Butcher?"

"Oh yes. I did some typing for him. Did he recommend me to you?"

"No. Harry's dead—"

"Oh my! He did look ill the last time I saw him. He had a bandage on his head . . ."

"I wanted to ask you about the typing job you did for him."

"Well, it was one of the strangest

jobs I ever had. I don't mean the content. Although that was pretty strange, I rarely pay attention to content. A lot of what my professors write seems odd to me, too. No, I mean the way he brought the job to me."

Harry had first brought her one composition notebook, like the one he had been making notes in when he was in the hospital. The notebook was filled in a neat, legible hand, with no strikeouts at all. Evidently this was a final draft.

The first notebook resulted in eighty pages of typescript, and Arlene charged Harry her usual rate of two twenty-five per page. Harry couldn't pay. He asked Arlene to hold onto the notebook and the typescript. He would pay her as soon as he could.

She thought that would be the last she'd see of him, but she hung onto the notebook and the typed copy anyhow. To her surprise, Harry came back, not only with the money to pay for the transcription of his first notebook but also with four more notebooks and a proposal. He would pay her a thousand dollars in advance if she could finish transcribing the notebooks within a month. This thousand bucks was, no doubt, part of the money Harry had wheedled out of Davis Fischer.

A month later Harry came back. He had one more notebook, less than half full. It consisted of "Notes," the documentation for his text, and "Acknowledgments," a grateful nod to those who had made the book possible, including William W. Williams and Davis Fisch-

er. Harry asked Arlene if she would type this new notebook at no additional charge, since his manuscript had come to less than four hundred typed pages. She agreed, and Harry took his first five notebooks but left the typescript with Arlene. He told her he would return in about two weeks. "That was late July," Arlene said, consulting her desk calendar. "July twenty-ninth."

Over a month passed before she saw Harry again. He was pale and nervous and had a bandage on his head. He collected his completed typing job and left with profuse thanks but no further conversation. I assumed that when he left Arlene he took the typed manuscript to the copy shop and then showed up on my doorstep. The sixth notebook was apparently the one that had turned up in the hands of Davis Fischer.

My interview with Arlene filled in some of the unknowns about Harry's movements, but it also raised some questions. For example, what happened to Harry's first five notebooks?

As I walked toward M Street, I realized how close I was to where Harry had been shot. Had he gone directly from leaving his "Notes" and "Acknowledgments" notebook with Arlene to the C&O canal towpath, where he shot himself or was mugged? I needed to know some precise dates. When I got home, I would call Matt. He would know when Harry was shot.

After I talked with Matt, I made another call. An answering machine picked up and repeated the

number I had dialed. I decided to go and see what I could find out.

Late on a Saturday afternoon the traffic wasn't bad. I drove straight up Mass. Ave. Near Twenty-third and Wyoming NW, I found a parking space and walked the remaining blocks to Kalorama Road. William W. Williams' basement apartment showed no sign of life. No light shone from the windows.

I stepped down into the areaway and knocked on the door. No answer. I tried the door. Locked. Where might Dub hide a key? I checked the obvious places. Under the doormat, on the ledge above the door, in a flowerpot in a corner of the areaway. No luck. When I leaned back against the wall to think about it, I felt a brick shift slightly. I slid the loose brick out, and there was a key. I tried it in the door, and it worked.

The small apartment was very much like the one in the basement of my house. To the right of the entrance beneath the front windows was the dining area—a round table with three chairs. One of the chairs had been knocked over and lay on its side. On the table was an empty whisky bottle and a glass with partially melted ice. It looked as though Dub had recently gone out for something, probably more whisky. He had fallen off the wagon when Fischer had brought him to my house, and he had apparently not climbed back on.

I looked around some more. At the opposite end of the room from the dining area, built-in bookcases extended from floor to ceiling across the wall separating the liv-

ing room from the bedroom. I examined the contents of the shelves. Most of the volumes had to do with East Asian history and politics. There were also some professional journals. In one corner was a shelf containing paperback editions of current popular fiction—no one can be a professional orientalist every waking hour. There was no sign of what I was looking for, but that didn't surprise me.

I was squatting down examining the lower shelves when I heard a rattling at the front door. I ducked into the bedroom. It seemed to take an inordinate time for whoever it was to get the door open. Then I heard footsteps, a heavy bang on the table, and a scraping sound as the chair was righted. It was probably Dub with a new bottle of whisky, picking up where he left off.

I looked around the bedroom. The furnishings consisted of one unmade twin bed, a nightstand with a clock radio on it, and, against the back wall, a Danish modern desk. The chair at the desk was the mate to the three in the dining area. On the desk was what I had scarcely hoped to find. Five composition notebooks. Harry's notebooks. It was time to confront Dub.

Dub was sitting at the table in the dining area. He had poured himself a fresh glass of whisky and was writing something on a yellow legal pad. He was completely absorbed in what he was doing and didn't even know I was in the room until I slammed the notebooks on the table before him. He jumped up, knocking over his chair and spilling whisky. We stared at one

another while who I was slowly registered in his whisky-soaked brain.

"So," I said, "why didn't you destroy these notebooks?"

He shrugged and bent over to pick up his chair. "Why didn't Nixon burn the Watergate tapes?"

He sat down again, and I took the chair on the opposite side of the table.

"You know," I said, "Fischer's been arrested for Harry's murder."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

"Yeah. But he was only the proximate cause of Harry's death. Harry would have survived the slapping around Fischer gave him if he hadn't been shot first. Whoever shot Harry on the C & O towpath back in July is at least as responsible for his death as Fischer."

"Yeah. And I bet you wonder who that could be. Don't be coy. Say it. *J'accuse!* Oh, the hell with it." He slumped in his chair. "You know, your buddy Butcher was no angel either. He tried to sell me the notebooks. Didn't tell me he had already made a deal with Fischer. Or had the whole thing typed." He shook his head violently and gave a short, sharp laugh, swallowed in a sob. "I thought the notebooks were the only copy of the book. I didn't have the money he wanted for them. So I took them."

"You're leaving something out. You shot Harry."

"It was an accident!" he protested. "I did pull a pistol on him, but he grabbed it. We struggled, and the gun went off. He didn't even remember it himself. When he called from your place, he tried to sell me the manuscript again!"

"You don't have to convince me of anything. Tell it to the cops."

"Are you going to take me in?"

"It's not my job." I shrugged. "I'll take these notebooks off your hands and report what I know to the police."

His expression was completely blank. He stood, swaying for a moment, before he marched with exaggerated precision toward the bedroom. I gathered the notebooks and, out of curiosity, turned the legal pad Dub had been working on so I could read it. It was a suicide note.

A shot rang out.

Eight months later Matt and I were again looking at the view from Saint Elizabeths. Spring was coming on, and the cherry trees around the Tidal Basin were starting to bloom. That usually meant that there would be one more blast of winter, maybe a snowstorm, in the next week or so.

"What do you think?" Matt asked. "Did Harry really believe that nutty theory he was peddling?"

I shrugged. "He believed he could make a buck out of it. That's at least as much as most conspiracy theorists believe. Why ask me? You're the psychologist."

"Yeah. But you're the politician, and this is about politics."

"This kind of politics is about psychology. Harry and other conspiracy theorists propose to answer the age-old question, if we're so good, why are things so bad? Look at this city. On the south, the Masons. On the north, the Catholics. In the

mythology of each group, the other is a source of evil in the world. In between we have the White House and the Capitol, which everyone knows are controlled by, take your pick, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Tri-lateral Commission, or the New World Order, whatever that is. And yonder is the Pentagon, the very hub of the military-industrial complex. And so on.

"A long time ago I answered the question to my satisfaction. To start with, we're not all that good. And when things go bad, it's not because of shadowy eminences behind the scenes pulling the ropes. We can screw up quite adequately on our own."

"So Harry was just another mountebank, hoping to strike it rich on the anxieties and paranoia of his fellow citizens?"

"Yeah. Maybe. On the other hand it might make sense if there were

some truth to his ideas, wild as they seemed."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing Williams would have had a stronger rationale for murder and suicide if there were a powerful cabal whose very existence he was trying to keep secret."

"In my experience as a psychologist, ego alone is an adequate motive for murder and suicide."

Of course Matt was right. Still, I can't get out of my mind what I saw when I went into Williams' bedroom and found him slumped over his desk with a bullet in his head. On the inside of his left wrist, where it would be hidden if he were wearing a watch, was a tattoo:



UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

"Good news!" boomed Eubie Judge, chief of the South Carolina branch of the FBI. He paused for effect.

Agents Harold Angel and Edgar Beever exchanged glances. The chief was seldom in such a jovial mood.

Beever could no longer control his curiosity. "What is it, sir?" he asked.

"We have a very reliable lead on the whereabouts of Willie 'Slippery' Willoughby, whose recent killing spree has promoted him to number one on our most wanted list. He's currently making his home near Minneapolis, but at the moment he is taking a vacation with his wife at the newly opened Empress-of-the-Sea hotel nearby, just over at Turtle Beach. No doubt he's changed his name again—to what I don't know—and I expect he's wearing heavy makeup to hide the scars from that knife fight in federal penitentiary just before his escape. Nevertheless, my informant is sure Willoughby is at the new posh hotel at Turtle Beach. He's probably planning new crimes."

"So what's the action?" inquired Agent Angel.

"We don't want to scare him off by questioning the desk clerk or the other guests at the hotel. You two check in at the Empress-of-the-Sea and find out who is registered there from Minnesota. That should narrow the field. Any questions?"

Edgar Beever spoke up. "How about a SWAT team for backup when we make the arrest?"

"You'll have the best in the FBI when the time comes."

As they were leaving, Agent Angel unfurled his umbrella against the chill February rain. "I wonder why Willoughby chose this season to take a vacation. It's the off-season for tourists."

"Probably to get away from the Minnesota blizzards," answered Beever. "Not that it matters if we can nail the guy."

The Empress-of-the-Sea still had GRAND OPENING banners flying from staffs in front. The two agents discovered that it had only ten couples registered, each assigned to a different floor, from floor 4 through 16 but with floors 6, 10, and 14 vacant. In the hotel parking structure they noted ten cars, each from a different state. Significantly, one was from Minnesota. Each of the rented rooms, they found, cost a different amount per day: \$250, \$260, \$270, \$290, \$300, \$320, \$330, \$350, \$360, and \$370. One of the couples was the Oxnam's.

Harold Angel and Edgar Beever investigated independently so as not to attract attention. At the end of the day they exchanged information. Between them they had found out the following:

(1) Four of the wives were blondes: Henry's wife, Mrs. Tillman. Flora, and the woman from Ohio. Four were brunettes: Edward's wife, Mrs. Quigley, Dotty, and the woman from Louisiana. Mrs. Ransom and the wife from Rhode Island had red hair. Of the ten women, no one had the same color hair as the nearest woman above or below her in the hotel.

(2) Mr. Sanders had a room four floors below the man paying \$300 a day and three floors above Janice's husband. The man from Virginia was two floors below Janice's husband. Their first names were Alfred, Bart, Claude, and Daniel. Three of their wives were brunettes, and the other had red hair.

(3) Floyd's room was three floors below Celeste's husband and more than one above the man paying \$330 a day, who was four floors above the man from Nebraska. Their last names included Kaplan, Lamarr, Mann, and Nixon.

(4) Helene was three floors below George's wife and three floors above Mrs. Parsons. One was a brunette, and the other two had hair of the same color.

(5) Ivan's wife was more than one floor above the woman from Tennessee, who was one floor above Mrs. Mann and four floors above the wife whose husband paid \$320 a day. They included Gigi, Helene, Idella, and Janice.

(6) Daniel paid \$10 more per day than the man from South Dakota, who paid \$20 more than Mr. Lamarr and \$40 more than Angela's husband. Their rooms were on floors 4, 7, 15, and 16.

(7) Beatrice's husband paid \$20 more a day than John and \$30 more than the man from Kansas, who paid \$20 more than the man on floor 16.

(8) Elvira's husband wasn't paying \$370 a day for his room. Neither Flora nor John's wife was brunette. Neither Helene nor Mrs. Sanders had red hair.

(9) The man paying \$260 a day was three floors below the one paying \$290 and three floors above the one paying \$360. None of the three was married to Angela, Beatrice, Idella, Mrs. Lamarr, Mrs. Nixon, George's

wife, or the woman three floors below George. Angela was two floors above Idella and more than one floor below Beatrice. Mrs. Lamarr and Mrs. Nixon were on floors 4 and 16 (in one order or another).

(10) Gigi (who wasn't married to George) was on the floor immediately below the woman from Louisiana and three floors above Alfred's wife (who wasn't Janice).

(11) The man from Pennsylvania was not the one with the \$260 room. The man from Tennessee wasn't Bart.

As the two agents pondered their notes, Harold Angel asked, "Well, Edgar, what's our next step?"

Agent Beaver snorted. "We now *know* who the man from Minnesota is. I suggest it's time to call in the SWAT team."

*Under what name was the evil Willie Willoughby operating?
On what floor of the hotel was he staying?*

See page 142 for the solution to the February puzzle.

.....

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FICTION

LADY APPLETON AND THE CAUTIONARY HERBAL



Kathy Lynn Emerson

A horn sounded to announce the arrival of a postboy at Leigh Abbey, a not uncommon occurrence, since the manor house stood so near the main road from London to Dover, one of the most traveled highways in Elizabeth Tudor's England. He was gone again before Susanna, Lady Appleton, reached the gatehouse, but he had left a package. She eyed it with mild surprise. Although she was in regular correspondence with a goodly number of friends and acquaintances throughout the kingdom, they rarely exchanged anything but letters.

Puzzled, she hefted the parcel. Nothing on the outer wrapping, which was slightly torn, hinted at who might have sent it, but the size and shape left little doubt she'd find a book inside. Her fingers trembled as she undid the string that bound it. The world thought her a widow, but she knew in her heart that her deceitful, traitorous husband still lived. She feared this might be some sort of communication from him.

To her astonishment, the package contained an inexpensive, unbound, folio copy of the volume she herself had written. *A Cautionary Herbal, being a compendium of plants harmful to the health* was the result of many years of research. Susanna had been motivated to compile it by her younger sister's untimely death following the consumption of some harmless-looking berries that had, in fact, been poisonous.

As she retraced her steps to the house, Susanna tried to think who

might have sent the book to her and why. It had not, she concluded, come from Sir Robert Appleton, who had disappeared just a year earlier. If he'd wished to communicate, he'd have sent a quite different book. But her relief was tempered by perplexity. That she was the author of this little herbal was no great secret, but on the title page the work was attributed only to "S. A." and her identity, or so she'd always believed, was not widely known.

Since no note accompanied the volume, Susanna carried it into her study and began to turn the leaves, looking for anything written in the margins. She found not a single annotation, but she did make another sort of discovery—a jagged edge where a single page had been torn out.

The entries were alphabetical, and each had a drawing opposite. The missing text had detailed the properties of hemlock, a particularly deadly poison. In ancient Athens it had been used for state executions.

"Most troubling," she murmured. Still carrying the book, she went to the window to stare out at fields, where the summer ploughing had begun, and orchards filled with apple trees in full flower and the last of the cherries. She found no solace in the peaceful vista, nor did the sight provide any answers.

A jangle of keys warned Susanna that Jennet, her housekeeper, had entered the chamber. She stopped short when she caught sight of her mistress's expression, then crept closer. She had to peer upward to

see Susanna's face clearly, for the lady of Leigh Abbey was uncommon tall. She had inherited that characteristic, along with her intelligence, her sturdy build, and the square set of her jaw, from her father.

Jennet, although of middling height for a woman, stood somewhat shorter. She was a blue-eyed, pale-skinned, fairhaired, small-boned individual who had gone from slim to plump in the course of giving birth to three children. She had never, in all the years she had served Lady Appleton, been shy about asking questions or expressing her opinions.

"What is the matter, madam? What has happened?"

Before Susanna could answer, Jennet caught sight of the herbal. She had no difficulty recognizing it or perceiving, as anyone in the household would, that it was not one of the copies housed at Leigh Abbey. Those were all bound in expensive hand-tooled leather.

"Someone sent this to me," Susanna said.

"Who?"

"It could have been anyone. It is not difficult to purchase a copy."

Indeed, it had been Susanna's hope when she wrote the slim volume that it would be readily available to all those who needed it. She had collected information on poisonous herbs for the benefit of housewives and cooks, those most likely to mistake one plant for another and accidentally poison an entire household.

"Madam, what is it?" Alarm made Jennet's voice sharp. "Your

face has of a sudden gone white as a winding sheet."

Susanna felt for a stool and sat down. "I feared this might come to pass," she whispered as a wave of dismay and guilt swept through her.

She'd realized soon after her book was published that in her effort to do good she had also gathered together a collection of recipes that could be used by an evildoer intent upon harm. This herbal, in the wrong hands, became a manual for murder. Did the package she'd just received mean *A Cautionary Herbal*, compiled in order to save lives, had been used to take one?

Susanna lifted the folio and stared at it, seeking in vain for answers. When she at last put it aside, she was determined to reason out who had sent it to her and why.

The postboy had come from London. She knew that much. And London was also the most likely place for her herbal to have been purchased. But was sending the book an announcement of a crime already committed or a challenge to her to prevent murder? If there were any chance she could do the latter, she knew she had to attempt it.

"We must go to London," she told Jennet. "At once."

John Day had printed Susanna's herbal. His premises in London were in Aldersgate. Literally. His printing house was set against the city wall. His shop and warehouse and his lodgings in the churchyard were attached to the gate. From the outside he did not appear to

have much space to conduct business, but the buildings extended backward and Susanna knew from a previous visit that there was a fine garden hidden away behind them.

There were many such pleasant places in London, did one but know where to find them. On this bright mid-June morning, however, Susanna was only interested in answers. Accompanied by Jennet and one of Leigh Abbey's grooms of the stable, she entered Day's place of business.

The rattle and clash of presses assaulted their ears as soon as they stepped through the door. An ink-ing ball stuffed with feathers brushed the top of Susanna's French hood. She wrinkled her nose at its pungent smell and took note of the location of several more of these offensive objects, which had been suspended from the ceiling in order to be within easy reach of Day's apprentices. A similar stench also emanated from the freshly printed pages draped for drying over lines strung between the presses.

As Susanna searched the huge workroom for Master Day, her gaze took in piles of quartos and pamphlets, already assembled and stacked on tables, and shelves piled high with boxes of movable type. The printer himself, a tall, thin man with a face like a basset hound's, was at his hand-press, so engrossed in producing an ornate title page from a finely engraved copperplate that he did not notice Susanna until she called out his name.

At once he abandoned his task. When she requested that they speak together in private, he escorted her to a comfortable parlor in his lodgings and settled her in his best chair.

"I came here, Master Day," she told him, "hoping you know what persons have of late bought copies of my book."

"I do not keep a record of the names of purchasers, Lady Appleton." With inkstained fingers he began to pleat the fabric of his long canvas apron. "And, indeed, my stock for the most part goes to book-sellers."

Her question had made him nervous. She wondered why. "You do sell some individual copies. Do you remember if any recent customer behaved in an odd manner? Think, Master Day. Do you recall one who looked furtive? Or guilty? And was there someone, mayhap, who asked you to identify the S. A. who wrote my book?"

"I print many books, madam, and have many customers." The fabric of his apron was now as goffered as a ruff, convincing Susanna that he must know more than he would admit to.

"Well then," she said with an exaggerated sigh, "there is no help for it. I must withdraw all remaining copies."

As she'd anticipated, Day was horrified by the possibility of lost profit. "You cannot be serious, madam!"

"My work may have been used to do murder, Master Day."

Shock, but no surprise, showed in his features. "Surely the good your

herbal may do far outweighs its potential to cause harm."

Although Susanna had reached that same conclusion during the two day journey from rural Kent to London, she was not inclined to let Day off the hook so easily. "Someone sent a copy of my book to Leigh Abbey with one page missing," she told him. "I believe that person intends to commit murder. Or has done so already. Have you heard of any deaths by poisoning here in London in recent days?"

"Indeed I have not!" Day sounded indignant, but he could not meet her eyes.

"Then mayhap I am in time to prevent one."

Susanna waited, saying nothing more, letting Day's own conscience prick at him. The printer's nervousness increased visibly, causing him to abandon the stool on which he'd been perched and begin to pace. He paused beside the window, through which drifted the scent of roses and honeysuckle from the garden below, then turned to glare at his unwelcome guest.

"What profit to save one life at the cost of another?"

"Explain yourself, good sir. I do not wish to bear responsibility for *any* death, and I would think you'd feel the same."

"You ask me to vilify a person who has done naught but buy a copy of your herbal."

So he did suspect someone! Elated, Susanna had to struggle to keep her voice level. "No crime has been committed yet. I would have that remain true. But you must see that I need to investigate. If my suspi-

cions are correct, if that torn page means someone contemplates murder, then how can I do nothing to stop it and still hope to live with myself? Give me a name, Master Day. Let me pursue the matter. You have my word that I will be discreet."

Day looked everywhere but at her.

"The book was *sent* to me." Using her most persuasive voice, Susanna rose from her chair and crossed to him to place one hand on his forearm. When he reluctantly met her eyes, she added, "Someone *wanted* me to know ... and to act."

Heaving a heavy-hearted sigh, Day capitulated. "Mistress Drood," he mumbled. "Wife to Ralph Drood the merchant. You will find his house on London Bridge, near the sign of the Golden Key."

In his misery his resemblance to a basset hound increased.

"She is his third wife, Lady Appleton. Her predecessors died under most suspicious circumstances."

Once more accompanied by Jennet and the groom, Susanna went first to the church of St. Magnus, located near the north end of the bridge. For some thirty years all England had been required by law to register births, marriages, and deaths. Some did so more religiously than others, but Susanna's luck was in. She found the entries she sought without difficulty. Day had been right. Drood had married his second wife only seven months after burying the first, and had wed

the third within a month of the second's demise.

"A most unlucky fellow," said the rector, who'd helped Susanna find the records.

"You know Ralph Drood?"

"Everyone knows Master Drood in this parish. He has given most generously to the church."

"A rich man, then?"

"Oh, aye."

Further questioning elicited the information that Drood imported iron, wax, ginger, woad, Spanish asses, herring, beaver, and wine. He exported grain and cloth and on occasion acted as a moneylender. He had a fine house on London Bridge, five stories high and filled with servants.

"Two maids and a cook among them," the rector bragged, "and Master Drood has property in the country, too."

"Why, then, do you say he is unlucky?"

"Two years ago he had a wife and son. Then the boy was overlaid and so died."

Overlaid. Susanna winced. Someone had rolled on top of him, and he'd suffocated. As a cause of death it was not uncommon, not when an entire family often slept in the same bed. She frowned. This family was wealthy. The child should have been sleeping in a cradle by himself.

"A few weeks after," the rector continued, "the bereaved mother died. Pining for her infant, or so 'twas said."

"Pining," Susanna recalled, had been written down as "cause of death" in the register. It was a use-

ful term, sufficiently vague to account for all manner of symptoms.

"Master Drood remarried without the customary year of mourning," she remarked.

"Aye, that he did. Well, why not?"

The rector's defensive tone of voice reminded Susanna that Drood was a generous contributor to the parish coffers.

"And the second Mistress Drood?"

"Stifled to death."

Another ambiguous term. "Do you mean that someone held a pillow over her face?"

Taken aback by the suggestion, the rector made haste to clarify. "She fell asleep in a closed room after lighting a charcoal stove to keep it warm. That was what the searchers determined."

The searchers were old women who examined bodies in order to report a cause of death to the authorities. They were untrained and ill-paid. Susanna put little faith in their skill. They could easily have made a mistake. More likely, she thought as she thanked the rector for his help and bade him farewell, they had been bribed to accept Drood's version of his wife's death.

London Bridge was entirely covered with shops, taverns, and houses, nearly two hundred buildings crammed together with room in the middle for carts, horses, and pedestrians to pass. At either end one could see that a river flowed beneath the structures, but once up on the bridge it seemed to be just another long street.

For that Susanna was grateful.

The mere sight of choppy water could make her queasy. She'd taken the precaution, en route from Day's premises to St. Magnus, of taking a preventative made of ginger root and peppermint.

An elderly maid answered the door at Master Drood's impressive dwelling. She led Susanna into a parlor, then took Jennet and the groom off to the kitchen. Jennet already had her instructions. She was to question the servants while her mistress spoke with Mistress Drood. Later they would compare notes.

Left alone to wait for her hostess, Susanna took stock of her surroundings. The room was lushly furnished with turkey carpets and heavy, ornately carved furniture. One oak chest in particular attracted her attention. The front had been inlaid with other woods in a design meant to depict the exterior of some elaborate building. Non-such, perhaps, the palace King Henry had built after destroying the village that had previously occupied the site.

She strode closer, curious to inspect the details. Too late, she realized that the open window above the chest looked directly down into the Thames. Swallowing hard, she backed away. Foolish, she chided herself, to grow so overwrought at the mere sight of the river below. But she did not go near the case-ment again.

"Lady Appleton?" a meek voice inquired. Mistress Drood was a pale-faced mouse of a woman in rose-color taffeta too fine for her station. She was also rather older

than Susanna had expected her to be. She looked frightened.

"Mistress Drood, I have come here to help you."

This comment seemed to surprise Mistress Drood. "I do not understand you."

"I believe you sent this to me." Susanna produced the herbal, which she'd brought with her in a pouch.

Mistress Drood's eyes widened, making it clear to Susanna that she recognized it, but she was still loath to admit anything. "Why would I do that?" she asked.

"Because I compiled this herbal. The initials S. A. represent Susanna Appleton."

"I did know that," Mistress Drood acknowledged.

"How?"

Flustered, the woman wrung her hands and kept her eyes downcast. "Master Baldwin told us. He supped with us one day last month and mentioned that his neighbor in Kent had written a book. He was mightily impressed by your scholarship, Lady Appleton."

One mystery solved, Susanna thought. Nicholas Baldwin, merchant of London, owned lands adjoining the Leigh Abbey demesne farm. And he did know she was the author of the herbal. She hastily repressed the small burst of pleasure she felt at learning he thought well of her for it. She was not here to garner praise.

"I believe you then bought a copy of my book," she said. "This copy."

Mistress Drood's head lifted. Her eyes were wide. "Oh no, Lady Appleton! I did not do that."

"You did," Susanna insisted. John Day had identified her, and he'd had no reason to lie. "Why?"

Tears welled up in Mistress Drood's eyes. "It was Master Drood's idea. He sent me to the printer to purchase a copy."

"Why?"

"Oh, Lady Appleton. He taunts me with it. He plans to kill me using one of the poisons you wrote about." Mistress Drood began to sob.

It was as she had feared, and yet something about Mistress Drood's tale did not ring true. "Who tore out the page?"

"He did. Oh, he did! And let me see that he'd done it, too. He means to torment me, to make the last days of my life a misery before he acts."

Made even more skeptical of these histrionics, Susanna studied Drood's wife. Most peculiar behavior, she thought, but she could not deny the woman's obvious distress. She led her to the window seat and made her sit down, careful to avoid looking out as she did so.

The words barely audible between sobs, Mistress Drood admitted to sending the herbal to Leigh Abbey and added that she'd done so because she wanted Susanna's help.

"But you sent no message with it, gave me no hint of who you were or what troubled you."

"I . . . I did send a note. It must have fallen out of the parcel."

Susanna frowned. Could a note have become detached? The wrapping *had* been torn.

"Why lie about it, then, when I

arrived? If you sent for me, you must have hoped I'd come."

With a lacy handkerchief she'd fished out of one sleeve, Mistress Drood patted her damp cheeks. "I was not thinking clearly. I feared my husband might recognize you. I did not precisely send for you, you see. I wrote to ask what that page contained and to request the antidote for whatever poison was upon it. I . . . I thought you would send a reply."

Susanna considered that. "You might have done better to go to Master Day and purchase another copy of my book."

The tears had ceased, but Mistress Drood's voice still had a hitch in it. "I . . . I did not dare. Master Drood might have heard of it. Then he'd have acted at once. As it is, I think . . . I think he is waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

She made a fluttery gesture with one hand. "Midsummer's Eve. Less than a week away."

Nonsense, Susanna thought, but she kept that reaction to herself.

"Ralph Drood killed his first two wives and got away with it," Mistress Drood said. "He believes he can do so again and this time he means to employ poison."

Susanna had no difficulty accepting that Drood had gotten away with murder. Criminals with powerful connections often did, especially those who had sufficient money to pay bribes. What troubled her was the suspicion that Mistress Drood had plans to strike first—to kill her husband before he could murder her.

She felt a reluctant sympathy for

the woman. Mistress Drood clearly believed her own life was at risk. Naught but desperation could have driven her to contemplate murder.

The woman did not look capable of harming a flea, but appearances could be deceiving. Even Susanna herself had once contemplated an act that would have brought about another's death. She had found the strength to resist in her deeply ingrained belief that anyone who exacted revenge by murder became as great a sinner as the person who had committed the original crime.

She frowned at the memory.

Then again, Mistress Drood might be telling the simple truth. Had she sent to Leigh Abbey for an antidote? Perhaps, Susanna thought, that *was* all she wanted—the means to save herself.

"Let us discuss your husband," she said. "What profit to him in your death?"

"Money."

"But he is already wealthy."

"To Ralph Drood, there is no such thing as too much money. He always wants more. That is the only reason he married me. When I'm gone, he can wed yet again, collect another dowry from some poor unsuspecting father burdened with a spinster daughter."

"Can you go back to your father's house?" That might buy time to conduct a proper investigation of Drood's actions.

Mistress Drood shook her head. "My father is as great a brute and bully as mine husband. He'd insist I return. And you need not suggest that I run away to friends. I have considered that. Master Drood

would find me and force me to come back. He is too rich and has too many powerful friends. I am doomed, Lady Appleton, unless you can give me an antidote to keep always at hand."

Susanna had powerful friends of her own. One in particular might be able to help her prove it if Drood were a murderer. "How can you be certain your husband killed his first two wives?" she asked. "Both cases were written down as accidents."

"I know they were murders." Mistress Drood spoke with convincing fervor. "He bragged to me of his deeds. He smothered one with a pillow. The other he starved to death."

"The law—"

"The law! Neither sheriff nor justice of the peace will act against him. He has the money to pay the most exorbitant bribe. Please, Lady Appleton. I beg of you. Tell me how to keep myself from being poisoned. What was on that page?"

Susanna sighed. "Hemlock."

"How may I recognize it?"

"The seeds might be mistaken for anise, the leaves for parsley. All parts of the plant are deadly, but the most powerful poison comes from juice extracted just as the fruit begins to form. This usually occurs toward the end of June."

"Around Midsummer Day?" Mistress Drood asked.

"Yes."

"He will no doubt try to give it to me in a drink."

"It has a most bitter taste."

"Could that be disguised by herbs?"

"Perhaps. Hemlock also has a disagreeable odor. A sort of mousy smell."

"And the antidote, should I notice these warning signs too late?"

"There is no sure antidote. There may be some small hope of survival if you empty your stomach at once. Some say that nettle seeds, taken inwardly, can counteract the poison, but I am not convinced they would be of any use. Hemlock is very potent and acts quickly. Few people, Mistress Drood, have ever cared to experiment on themselves, or others, to determine the efficacy of an antidote."

"Would my death look like an accident?" Drood's wife seemed to grow more calm with each bit of information Susanna provided.

"Aye. It well might."

Before Mistress Drood could ask any more questions, the slam of a door below and a series of sneezes alerted them to the return of her husband. "You must go," she whispered, panic evident in every nuance of her voice. "Hurry! Leave before he sees you, before he hears your name. It will go hard on me if he finds you here."

"Do nothing," Susanna warned as she was hustled out the back way. "Trust me to find a way to help you."

From the street outside, where she waited for Jennet and the groom to join her, Susanna heard Master Drood berating his wife. The words were indistinct, but there was no mistaking his foul temper. It seemed to get worse every time he was seized by a fit of sneezing.

"The cook says Master Drood sneezes for weeks at a time at this season of the year," Jennet remarked, appearing suddenly at her mistress's side.

Inhaling crushed basil might help, Susanna thought, but she felt no inclination to offer that helpful suggestion. "Do the servants think he killed his first two wives?"

"None of them seemed to care if he had. They are well paid and have a roof over their heads and food in their bellies. Their loyalty is to Master Drood, not his wife." Jennet might have said more, but they had reached the end of the bridge, where boatmen waited to be hired.

Susanna had to make a decision.

From the upriver side of London Bridge it was but a short ride in a wherry to reach the water stairs at Blackfriars. Throughout this brief journey, Susanna kept her eyes firmly fixed on the shore. Not even her special ginger and peppermint mixture could completely quell the disquiet in her stomach, but at least she did not disgrace herself by being sick. It helped to keep her mind blank. Jennet, accustomed to her mistress's difficulty with travel on water, did not distract her with speech.

Sir Walter Pendennis had his lodgings in Blackfriars, an enclosed precinct in the most westerly part of London. Once it had been a monastery, but in King Henry's reign it had been broken up into shops and dwellings.

Near the north end of the former cloister was a door leading to the

narrow stairs to Sir Walter's rooms. He lived above what had been the monks' buttery.

"My dear," Sir Walter greeted her when his manservant showed her in. "May I offer you some wine?" He insisted she sit in the comfortable Glastonbury chair he'd just vacated.

"Something restorative would be most welcome." As she remembered from a previous visit, a table by the window held a variety of drink. Sir Walter looked well, she thought, as he filled a crystal goblet for her. If he was a few pounds heavier than when she'd last seen him, he was tall enough and so broad-shouldered that his love of good food had not yet rendered him obese. He served her, then topped off a large, brown earthenware cup with ale for himself.

Revived by a few sips of fine Canary, calmed by the pleasant scent of marjoram flowers and woodruff leaves rising from the rushes underfoot, Susanna sketched out the bare bones of her tale.

"I know something of this man," Sir Walter remarked when Susanna had completed a concise summary of the facts as Mistress Drood had presented them.

"That you have heard his name is ominous in itself. Is Drood spy or smuggler?"

He might well be both if Sir Walter took an interest in him. Her old friend was the most prominent of the queen's intelligence gatherers, a man with considerable influence at the royal court. Susanna had decided to speak to him for that very reason, and because she knew he

would not mock her concerns as a constable or a justice of the peace or one of London's sheriffs might.

"I have no proof against him. Only suspicions." Sir Walter absently smoothed one hand over his sand-colored beard, dislodging a crumb of bread. "We want evidence."

"Evidence of what?"

To her surprise he told her. "Clipping." At her blank expression, he clarified. "Clipping is a form of counterfeiting. For some men there can never be enough wealth. They adulterate coin of the realm, scraping off some of the gold to sell, and then spend the clipped coins as if they had full value. In a case not long ago a woman clipped twenty half sovereigns, worth ten shillings each, by sixpence a piece."

"And Drood makes a practice of this?"

"Aye. He has done so for some time. Clipping was made a treasonous offense more than a century ago, but a loophole in the law has existed for the last ten years. It has only recently been closed, and the Crown has been working ever since to apprehend those who profited in the interim."

Susanna did not need further explanation of Sir Walter's "loophole." She knew already that when the Catholic Queen Mary had come to the throne she'd nullified a great many laws, part of an attempt to overturn all that men of the New Religion had accomplished during the reigns of King Henry VIII and his short-lived son, Edward. As a result the baby had often been thrown out with the bathwater.

"He is clever, our Master Drood,"

Sir Walter continued, "but if I can persuade Mistress Drood to help us build a case, we may catch him yet." He gave a wry chuckle. "A pity I cannot simply encourage her to poison her husband before he gets a chance to poison her. That would solve any number of problems."

Susanna gripped the arm of her chair so tightly that she left little pockmarks in the swath of blue velvet flung across it for padding. "How can you joke about such a thing? Murder is never justified! And you know as well as I do that Mistress Drood would at once be suspected if her husband died. At the slightest hint of foul play, she would be arrested for his murder, and tried, and executed, too."

With a courtly little bow Sir Walter acknowledged her point, then resumed his former pose by the window, one shoulder negligently propped against the frame. "My apologies, my dear. You are right to admonish me. But what, then, would you have me do?"

"Prove Drood guilty of this clipping. As you suggest, Mistress Drood will be inclined to help you gather evidence against him. All you need do is explain the situation to her."

"I can offer her protection and some sort of reward for her cooperation."

Encouraged, Susanna smiled at him. Clipping would be easier to prove than murder, and it carried the same penalty. "What can I do to help?"

"Go home."

When she started to protest, he held up a hand.

"Mistress Drood has already told you that her husband knows you wrote that herbal. To involve yourself further will only complicate matters, and possibly place you in danger. Besides, now that you have brought the situation to my attention, you may rely upon me to deal with it in the best manner possible."

Although his reassurances left her far from quiet in her mind, Susanna accepted the argument that she would get in the way of an official investigation. She might even compromise it. "You'll arrest Drood as soon as you can?"

"I swear it."

With that she had to be content, but she had no intention of going home until matters were settled. She returned to temporary lodgings at the Blossom Inn to await developments.

"Well, Jennet," Susanna said a short time later, kicking off her shoes and putting her feet up, "we have done a good day's work."

"Yes, madam," Jennet agreed. "Were you still wanting to know what the servants said?"

"We have not yet had the opportunity to compare notes, have we?"

Jennet had overheard Susanna's discussion with Sir Walter, but it was plain she was far from satisfied. In her effort to be brief and to the point, Susanna had left out a good many details. For Jennet's benefit she now recounted her conversation with Mistress Drood in full. By the time she finished, Jennet was chewing industriously on her lower lip, a sure sign she was troubled.

“What?”

“Perhaps nothing, madam. Servants do like to exaggerate their own importance.” She had good reason to know that, being a mistress of the art herself.

“Let *me* decide. What did you learn from the maids?”

“One of them is an elderly woman named Joan. She came to the household with the first Mistress Drood and stayed on.”

Susanna nodded, remembering the servant who had admitted them. “Nothing odd in that.”

“She knew who you were. Said she’d been hoping you’d turn up. Said *she* was the one sent the herbal to Leigh Abbey. Said she knew you wrote it because she overheard Master Baldwin say so to Master Drood. Said she’d also heard you were clever at figuring things out.”

“Did Master Baldwin say that, too?” Susanna thought it unlikely. He’d not have wanted to explain how he knew.

“Joan said she’d heard that from a certain . . . person in Southwark.”

“Oh,” said Susanna. She did have friends in Southwark . . . of the disreputable sort.

“Joan said she does not know how to write, so she sent the herbal without any message. She got the rector of St. Magnus to write your name and Leigh Abbey, Kent, on the wrapping. Said I could ask him if I did not believe her. Said she hoped you would know what to do about Mistress Drood.”

“Mistress Drood says *she* sent me the book.” But at first she’d seemed confused about that, Susanna remembered.

“Joan said Mistress Drood bought the book and tore out a page, then discarded the rest. Joan found it. She cannot read, but she could see by the illustrations what the book was about. She thinks Mistress Drood means to poison her husband. Joan is not pleased by that. She fears she’ll be turned out once Mistress Drood is in charge.”

Susanna’s feet hit the floor with a thump. Beset by a terrible sense of urgency, she donned her discarded shoes. “We must go back to Master Drood’s house.”

If Joan was telling the truth, if Mistress Drood had planned all along to kill her husband and not the other way around, then Susanna’s unexpected visit, followed so closely by the one Sir Walter had by now paid, might provoke her to act precipitously.

If murder for gain were Mistress Drood’s purpose, it would not suit her to have her husband executed. That would make her a widow, true enough, but in cases of treason the crown seized all the traitor’s property. Mistress Drood would be left penniless.

They had most of the city to cross, and as it was now late afternoon, progress was slow. The streets were thronged with people hurrying home to sup.

The house on London Bridge was in an uproar by the time they arrived. “My wife! My poor stupid wife!” Ralph Drood danced a little jig as he bellowed the words. There was nothing griefstricken in his expression.

Neither was he a great hulking brute, as Susanna had imagined. Ralph Drood was a scrawny little man whose most prominent features were a bushy red beard and a nose and eyes made nearly as red by his fits of sneezing.

"We are too late," Susanna whispered to Jennet. "He has already poisoned her."

But there was no sign of Mistress Drood, alive or dead, in the house. Susanna returned to the parlor, this time noticing obvious signs of a struggle. Broken crockery and scattered papers littered the floor. The ornate chest she had noticed earlier, which had been centered beneath the window, had been shoved to one side.

Frustrated beyond caution, Susanna marched up to Drood and grabbed him by the front of his doublet. "What happened to your wife?" she demanded. "Where is she?"

For an instant she thought he would not answer. Then he laughed, a wild, triumphant sound, and pointed to the window. "She fell in to the river and is surely drowned. A terrible accident."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"Just now. Just before you came in."

Without another word Susanna released Drood and ran from the house, calling to her groom to follow. No one had searched the water for Mistress Drood. Why should they? Her own husband clearly wanted her dead. He had, in all likelihood, pushed her out that window. But if she had survived the fall, and if she had managed to stay afloat, there might yet be time to

save her. More hope of it, Susanna thought, than if she'd swallowed hemlock.

Susanna put her own chronic fear out of her mind when she reached the end of the bridge. She signaled for a wherry. "Which way would the river carry someone who fell from up there?" She pointed toward the Drood house.

The waterman gestured downstream.

"Row that way, and quickly."

What followed was one of the most horrific journeys Susanna had ever endured. Her stomach in knots, her mind in equal turmoil, she had to force herself to scan the choppy water for any sign of Mistress Drood. All manner of watercraft moved with the tide. Among the larger crafts were barges of the type noblemen used and a "shout" that carried timber.

With the tide going out, Mistress Drood had not been swept into the giant pilings that supported the bridge, but there was plenty of debris in the water that might have been just as deadly. There were also dead dogs and cats and even a dead mule.

How could anything survive in this foul cesspit? Susanna wondered. At just that moment she caught sight of a hand extending from a rose-colored sleeve and clinging to a piece of driftwood.

They hauled Mistress Drood's limp form into the wherry, but they were too late. She was no longer breathing, and they could not revive her.

Sir Walter Pendennis was wait-

ing at Drood's house when Susanna returned with the body.

"Can you find enough in a search to warrant his arrest for treason?" Tight-lipped, Susanna watched Walter's face as she waited for an answer.

"I will find proof."

His promise gave Susanna little satisfaction. She had failed to keep Ralph Drood from killing his wife. That he would be executed for other crimes would not bring back any of the unfortunate women who had been his spouses.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"In the room from which she fell. He has been drinking heavily since you left."

Drood looked up when they entered, never pausing in the act of broaching a new bottle and sloping wine into his goblet. He drank deeply, then waved the cup in Susanna's direction. "Most excellently spiced," he declared, and sneezed yet again.

Susanna's sense of smell was unimpaired. She had no difficulty identifying the contents of the goblet. Her heart began to beat a little faster.

Sir Walter Pendennis, royal intelligence gatherer, did not seem to notice anything amiss. His men had arrived. Instructing two of them to guard Drood, he led the remainder off to search the premises.

Drood continued to drink.

Susanna did nothing.

She estimated that a bit more than a quarter of an hour passed before Drood complained that his arm had gone numb. A little later, he began to feel pain in his muscles.

Within an hour, he was barely able to move. He had lost all sensation in his limbs as well as the ability to speak.

"Soon," Susanna told him, "you will also be blind, and yet your mind will function perfectly well. You will know what is happening to you. You will retain full consciousness until the last."

Sir Walter came quietly into the room as she was speaking, alerted to what was happening by one of the guards he'd left. "Did he kill the first two wives?"

"I am convinced he did." Everything pointed to it, even if the last Mistress Drood had lied about wanting Susanna's help.

Sir Walter bent over the dying man. "We'll never know for certain. He is past having the ability to speak. He cannot even move his head to nod or express denial.

"Mistress Drood was in no apparent rush to kill him," Susanna murmured, "until you threatened to arrest him and charge him with treason."

Sir Walter did not seem unduly disturbed by the notion. "She miscalculated when she provoked her husband's temper at just the wrong moment."

"She had the poisoned wine ready and waiting when they quarreled and he pitched her out the window. Then he celebrated her death by drinking the wine."

"A fine irony." Sir Walter stared down at Drood's almost lifeless body. "Such a death is just. A murderer should be forced to linger for many agonizing hours, to have ample time to understand that pun-

ishment has been exacted for his crimes."

Susanna sighed. She felt remorse but no pity for the condemned man. "There will be an inquest, certes. I must—"

But Sir Walter held up a hand to silence her.

"The searchers will give out that Drood died of a surfeit of drink. And you and I, my dear, were never here."

For just a moment Susanna wondered if her old friend had done more than ask for Mistress Drood's cooperation. She decided she did not want to know. Neither did she

have any desire to make public the fact that her book, written to save lives, could also be used to commit murder.

She had sought the truth. Belatedly, she had found it. Revealing it, she thought with a mixture of resignation and regret, would only make matters worse. Casting a last look at Master Drood before Sir Walter escorted her out of the room, out of the house, out of London, Susanna consoled herself with the only redeeming grace in all this tragedy.

Even without truth there had been justice.

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Music from a Sick Muse

Robert Loy





The Jurgens family stood in somber silence as the constable led the manacled manservant off to justice.

"Well, Inspector Ives, you've done it again, by Jove," said John Jurgens, grateful that the murderer of his mother, brother, and postman had been apprehended.

"Maybe that should be 'by Jeeves,'" observed Inspector Ives.

And the sound of laughter was heard once again in the hard-hit home.

The end.

Max Cavanaugh cleared his throat, removed his glasses and gathered up his manuscript papers, giving his wife Kimberlynn a chance to mentally arrange her kudoes and huzzahs. This was the fifteenth rewrite of *Murder Most Monstrous*, and there was no doubt in his mind but that it now shone like a diamond.

"Well?" he asked after donning his humble-author face.

She sighed, looked him in the eye for four or five seconds, then let her gaze return to the ceiling. "I don't know what to say," she said.

"Just be honest. You know that all I ever want is your simple, honest opinion."

"Well," she said, "the alliteration. You know, it's almost always annoying."

"That happens to be my new style. Would you say to Hemingway, 'Hey, Ernie, you need to cut back on all these short, choppy sentences?'"

"No. But alliteration is not the only problem. I mean, what about

the fact that you've got the butler as the murderer? Isn't that just about the biggest cliché in the world?"

"Yes, absolutely, in one sense it is. But don't you see how perfect that makes it? Nobody will expect a bestselling Edgar-winning writer to—"

"Not to mention the fact that the family lived in a mobile home in Mississippi. I couldn't figure out how they could afford to have a butler."

Max's humble-author visage crumbled under the onslaught of the long-suffering, misunderstood genius face. "Oh, what do *you* know?"

"Nothing. I know absolutely nothing. I'm your typical mystery reader; that's why you run them by me first. I just don't see why sharecroppers would have a bunch of butlers and chambermaids and chauffeurs and stuff. Do they even have sharecroppers any more?"

"You, my dear, are *not* a typical reader," Max huffed. "*You* are a typical moron."

And Max stormed out of the room and up the stairs to his loft.

Kimberlynn waited until she heard the door slam as she knew it would. Only then did she give a snort of laughter and shake her head. It was not a laugh of mirth. God knew that what had happened to her husband's writing ability was not funny.

She was just so relieved she hadn't had to go into all the reasons why a glue gun was not a good choice for a murder weapon.

Max Cavanaugh had not writ-



ten a publishable word in months. During that time he'd worn out a diagonal line of carpet in his loft. Kimberlynn had tried a couple times to repair it, but he wouldn't let her. There was something satisfying about pacing in that trench, about having your body in a groove when your mind just couldn't find one of its own.

But not today. Nothing was satisfying today. What was wrong with his wife? Why had she so viciously attacked *Murder Most Monstrous* when it was obviously a solid and polished masterpiece? Was she jealous of his genius like so many critics and younger writers were?

No matter. The publisher and the public and the—the—he racked his brain to think of another “p” word just to spite her—well, the publisher and the public would love it.

Especially the part where the evil genius butler went down into the basement of the trailer and invented that silencer for his glue gun.

Max stopped pacing.

Basement of a trailer?

Glue gun? Hell, you can't kill anybody with a—

He smacked himself in the forehead, harder than he had intended.

“Oh my God, it stinks! Fifteen rewrites and it's still putrid! It stinks! *I* stink! What is going on here? Can't I even write a story that makes some damned sense?”

He kicked the printer stand and punched an oak bookcase.

“I'm finished! Ruined! What am I supposed to do now? I'm too old to go back to school and too young—and probably too dumb—to be a Wal-Mart greeter.”

He hurled the pages onto his desk. When that proved unsatisfying, he picked up an Office Max catalogue and pitched that, too.

Max thought he heard something. Something that sounded remarkably like a voice. A faint voice that said, “Yo—hey!” It sounded as if the voice came from under the hurled catalogue.

Oh, great! Max thought. First I lose my talent, now I'm losing my marbles.

Still, he picked the papers up. He would need them to start the bonfire in which he intended to immolate himself.

Of course there was nothing under there. No, wait, there *was* something. What was that, a beetle? Something in the bug family.

He couldn't tell for sure, since he didn't have his glasses on. And it didn't really matter anyway.

He rolled up that morning's *Courier* and drew back his arm to take out some of his frustration on this bug's handy head.

The bug put her hands on her hips—thorax—and said, “I don't think so!” hiccupped, then added, “Like, what is wrong wiff you, mortal dude? Don't you know all that anger and aggression's bad for your trunkpump?”

Max dropped the newspaper, squinted at the bug, dug his glasses out of his shirt pocket, squinted at the bug some more.

Something was definitely not right about this particular insect, and it actually took him a minute to realize that what it was was her breasts. Her breasts and her disheveled, purple-streaked hair.

"Ya know, Mister Shakespeare, I think you broke my ankle with your little temper tantrum there. You keep that up and I won't give you any more magnificent, mystifying mysteries."

She leapt, hit a coffee cup, and fell off Max's desk. For a second her translucent wings fluttered and held her aloft, but in her floundering she got her foot caught in one of her wings and plummeted to the carpet. Max got down on his knees to see what this most interesting insect would do next.

"Go 'way," the bug sputtered as it struggled to get to its feet. "Ya can't see me, so just go 'way."

But the bug was wrong. Max *could* see her. She was just a little less than an inch and a quarter tall, past plump and hurtling headlong toward fat. Her hair was either extraordinarily curly or hadn't been combed for over a week. Her eyebrows and her bottom lip were pierced, and on her upper arm was a tattoo that said BORN TO RAISE HADES. She wore a loose, billowy off-the-shoulder dress. It was stained and—though it was hard to tell for sure—appeared to have several cigarette burns.

"Do you need any help?" Max asked.

"Oh no, ya mean ya *can* see me? That ain't supposed to happen!" The bug—no, whatever it was, it wasn't a bug—the little pixie person put her head in her hands dramatically. "Oh, what am I gonna do! Calliope is just gonna, like, kill me!"

"Are you all right?" Max asked.

She sneered. "Yeah. Yeah, ya big

mobard, not that that's any of your beeswax, but yeah, I am all right. My head is pounding; I've got a strong hunch I'm gonna be seeing my lunch again *real* soon; I've sprained a wing, and now I'm so dense that mortals can see me—see and pity me—but other than that everything's quacky. Thanks for asking, now go off somewhere and drop dead, wouldjaplease."

"What are you?" Max asked.

"I am in deep trouble, Edgar Allan, that's what I am. Say, you haven't seen a giggly old bawdowager—blonde hair, cucumber boobs—running around with a bottle of merry-go-down in her hand and probably a lampshade or sumfin' on her head, have you?"

"Have I what?"

"Never mind, I know you haven't seen Euphrosyne. I'm the only one lucky enough to be your playmate." She rubbed her eyes. "Man, what *did* that hussy put in that last Siren's Wail?"

"What are you?" Max knew he had already asked that question, and he could tell that a straight answer was probably not forthcoming, but something about the little woman's voice was familiar. He wanted to hear her talk some more so he could figure out why.

In response she started fluttering her right wing; the other one just flopped around uselessly. When she didn't become airborne, she looked over her shoulder to see what was the matter and slapped herself in the face with the misaligned left one.

Over the protests of his knees, Max bent down even farther to



hear the remarkable string of curse words she unleashed after this latest indignity. Nearly visible bubbles of alcoholic air popped around his nostrils.

"Good lord! What have you been drinking?"

"Dude, I do not know. We ran out of the good stuff and had to pilf something out of your rotgut rack. Hey, I know you make plenny of clinkers with that bilge you scribble, so whyn't you splurge and get some Cutty Sark or sumfin'?"

"You mean you've been stealing my liquor? But I haven't noticed any of it missing." Max had begun periodically inventorying his alcohol supplies when his son Mycroft was a teenager and had never gotten out of the habit.

"When you're as petite as I am," the plump pixie said, "it doesn't take much to get a good headwhirl."

Something in the way she said it and Max knew where he had heard that voice before, knew it beyond a doubt even though it was impossible.

"Do me a favor," Max told her. "Say 'Stradmore, have you gone mad? Put down that glue gun.'"

"Aw, naw, I ain't sayin' nuffin without an attorney," she stated. "Well, an attorney or a shot of sumfin' zizzy, one of the two; I'm not hard to get along with."

"How is your sister Melpomene?" Max asked. "She was always my favorite."

"Melpomene is a mopey, morose old humdrumpling. And, dude, she is like totally not my sister. She's my great-great-great-aunt-in-law or sumfin'."

"Which one are you?" Max asked. "I'm Dashiella, and you are giving me one skull-splitter of a—"

"No, you're not. I know my Greek mythology. There was no Muse named Dashiella."

"You know your *ancient* history. I'm not nearly as relicky as Clio and Thalia and those old fangy fossils. I haven't even hit the big four-oh-oh yet. I am the newly appointed Muse of mystery fiction. Well," she corrected herself, "I am the Muse of Max Cavanaugh mystery fiction. Woo-woo." She rolled her eyes and made a spinning "big deal" gesture with her index finger.

"It's not like the olden days, you know," she continued, "when one gal could flit around whispering in all the right ears. Today it's a team effort. Calliope is in charge of us now, since Apollo got oldtimer's disease; she hasn't had much to do since the whole epic poetry gig came grinding to a halt. I mean, nobody's writing any of that 'thouslewest-thee' junk any more. And thank Hera, you know what I mean?"

Max stood up. He needed a cigarette, and his knees and his sense of credulity needed a break. What in the hell was going on here? Mus-es weren't real, and they weren't supposed to be visible even if they *were* real. According to ancient Greek and Roman mythology, they were ethereal beings, minor goddesses, who whispered in artists' and other creative people's ears. This was the voice that had supplied Max with the plot and the dialogue for all the great mysteries he had written.

No, this was the voice that given him all the hopeless dreck of the last few months. Something had gotten mixed up somewhere, and the brilliant goddess he used to write with had been replaced with a clumsy, foul-mouthed lush.

"What happened to my other Muse? The one I've been working with? Is she on vacation or something?" Max asked hopefully.

"Dude, she died—probably from boredom judging by some of the swipp you guys wrote together. I tried to wade through some of that stuff, and it put me right out. You sure love them adjectives, dontja? And why is there so much hittin' and killin' in these mysteries? Every time you turn around, some poor fleeb is getting nonked on the head or sumfin'."

Max started to take umbrage but decided to let it go. He needed to get back to work, and if this was who he had to work with, so be it.

Kimberlynn was surprised to see her husband emerge so quickly from his self-imposed exile. She was amazed to see him take every single bottle of liquor from the cabinet above the refrigerator, the cooking sherry, the four remaining members of a six-pack of Heineken, and even that peach-flavored wine cooler that had been in the back of the refrigerator for at least two years and pour them all down the sink.

"Max, are you all right?"

He didn't answer but rinsed all the bottles out with hot tap water and threw them in the trashcan. Then he strode into the living room to the mantelpiece, where he

grabbed an old pewter stein his grandfather had left him and walked back into the kitchen.

"Honey, I applaud you for stopping drinking—if that's something you feel you need to do—but there's nothing in that stein."

"I know," Max said as he headed back upstairs to his loft. "Just making room for that next Edgar."

For days Max got nothing accomplished but the complete wearing away of the padding beneath his carpet groove. He tried to be patient, telling himself that Dashiella would get back to writing as soon as she got over her hangover. She'd still be young—if immortals could ever be considered young—but there was nothing to be done about that. All he could do was be sure she stayed sober.

Over Kimberlynn's bewildered objections the Cavanaughs had ceased entertaining. If Muses were real, it stood to reason that other members of the Greek pantheon were also still kicking. Dionysus was obviously the biggest potential troublemaker, but there was no reason for him to come around now that all the "nectar of the gods" had been thrown out. Max did not want the Graces hanging around corrupting his Muse either: Euphrosyne, the very spirit of a party; Thalia, moonlighting from her Muse job, as the goddess of jokes; or Aglaia, who gave public speakers the power to captivate an audience.

Well, maybe Aglaia. When was Dashiella going to get off her duff and do some writing?



He hadn't slept in his own bed or seen much of Kimberlynn either. He wanted to be at the keyboard when his new Muse dried out.

Late on the fourth afternoon Max heard a faint, familiar voice at the back of his head, and he sat down at his computer and went into a typing frenzy.

"This is good. Oh yeah, this is really good," he kept saying to himself. But when he finished he discovered that the magnum opus he'd been pouring his heart into was actually a grocery list.

Even there Dashiella's influence was evident. Hidden amongst the bread, milk, and vine-ripened tomato listings were notations to pick up a few fifths of Absolut and Johnny Walker Red.

Three long balled-up-blank-paper days later as Max practiced typing exercises to keep from punching the walls he once again slipped into Wordsmith mode. Once again he was sure that this time he was back on track.

Once again he was wrong.

What he had written was not the beginning of an Edgar-worthy mystery novel. It wasn't even a short story. It was poetry.

Of sorts.

"What is this?" Max cried, holding the pages with two fingers and scowling. "K is for the way you're always so kind, I is for your eyes, so brown and fine!" Dashiella, what the hell is this supposed to be? Dashiella!"

Dashiella crawled out from behind a thesaurus on the top of Max's desk hutch.

"It's a love poem, dude. Maybe it's not up to stuffy old Erato's standards, but Valentine's Day is coming up and you really need to, like, stoke up the old Kim embers, if you know what I mean."

"I do not know what you mean, and I seriously doubt that you do either. What is—"

"Okay, but you oughtta know your wife has been fantasizing a lot more lately about her old college studbunny Lance Scribner. I mean, she never really stopped fantasizing about him, but now she's doing it during daylight hours, too, not just when y'all are making with the nighttime kissy-koo stuff."

"What the hell is that supposed to—"

"The other day, right, I was buzzing around whispering in her ear, trying to convince her that thirty-seven is not too old to take up grog-guzzling, and I heard her tell her friend Lila that she sometimes wished she'd married a Scribner instead of a scribbler."

"She said that?"

"And that poem is actually pretty decent. Ya know, before I got demoted to the Muse of Max Cavanaugh mystery muck, I used to be the Muse of this cool kid Homer Jenkins. He was in ninth grade, right, and he had the hots for this girl in tenth—Angela Andolotti. We used to write these poems where all the words in each line started with the same letter of the alphabet. So it was like 'Angela Andolotti, bodacious body—'"

"That's it!" Max shouted. "I've tried to be patient, I've tried to be understanding. But you are fired."

Go on back to Olympus. Tell Zeus or Poseidon or whoever's on duty to-night to send me somebody who can write—no luses, no klutzes, no gossips. And definitely no poets.”

“Yeah, right,” Dashiella snorted.

“You heard me. Pack up your bags, your alliteration, and your appalling absence of talent, and get the hell out. Now. Tell Calliope I want a—”

Dashiella shook her head.

“Uh, dude, like—hello? You don't fire Muses. We are a gift from the gods.”

“Some gift,” Max snorted.

“Well, I'm the only Muse you'll ever have.”

“You mean I'm stuck with you? I can't get rid of you even though you're grossly incompetent?”

“And that vice is versa, too, let me tell ya. But don't get all swerky about it. I'll be retiring in a few years—well, my few, not yours, about nine hundred and fifty years.”

Max snatched up Dashiella and shook her in his fist.

“Now, you listen, you drunken, drivel-spouting punkette. Max Cavanaugh does not write romantic dreck. What Max Cavanaugh writes is—”

His study door swung open and Kimberlynn poked her head in.

“Are you all right? I heard—”

“Get out!” he screamed. “This is a private conversation and does not concern you.”

Kimberlynn looked from Max's face to the empty fist he seemed to be talking to, and back again.

“You heard me. Get out of here now!”

It was only after he'd spent another two nights staring at white paper, writing love poems to liquor (“Absinthe and ale/Beer, brandy and/Champagne cocktails”), pacing and cursing, that he discovered his wife had taken his instructions literally.

No matter, he said to himself next morning. It's a blessing in disguise. It'll be a lot easier to write in a quiet house.

And the writing did seem to go better. Five days after Kimberlynn's departure he had an idea for what he felt sure was a mystery. He no longer trusted his instincts, however, so he stopped every couple of paragraphs to make sure he wasn't writing freshman Valentine doggerel or a toper's grocery list.

No, this was good stuff. Really primo. The old Max Cavanaugh was back in the saddle again.

He did ten thousand words without biting one fingernail or smoking one Doral. He could have done more, but he wanted to see how it read so far on paper.

He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths while the Laser-jet spat out pages. He felt sad for a moment when he remembered that Kimberlynn was gone and he'd have no one to read it to, no one to tell him how excellent it was.

His excitement grew as he read. This wasn't just good. It was magnificent. The characters were interesting, the mystery was baffling but fair. The settings—always his weak suit—were rich and detailed.

He was on page twenty-seven be-



fore he realized just how good this story was.

This was definitely good enough to win an Edgar. No doubt about it. It had already won one back in 1978 when Lawrence Block wrote it.

Dashiella hadn't completely plagiarized Block, however. She had changed the protagonist's name to Phillip Farnsworth and the villain's to Victor Vesuvius.

"Arrrr!" Max growled as he ripped the offending pages to confetti. "Where are you, you worthless sot?"

A gurgly moan told him where his inspiration agent and John Barleycorn were trysting. Dashiella was on top of the bookcase with a travel-sized bottle of nail polish remover.

Max sprang out of his chair, grabbed the bottle, and threw it out the loft's single window, shattering it and letting in a rush of cold, late January air.

Max snatched Dashiella up by the neck and brought her close to his face.

"What are you *doing*?" he shouted. "Are you crazy?"

"Why no, Mr. Kettle, I'm not black at all." Dashiella looked at the shattered window. "Ya know, I've met some fresh-air freaks before, but you really take the—"

"Why are you drinking again after I—"

"Drinking? Drinking fingernail polish remover? Dude, you have gone completely filberts. I wasn't drinking that stuff; I was doing my nails, but I winked off for a minute. Whaddaya think?" She held out a

tiny hand with three bare nails and two painted ones. "I can't finish now, since you flung my beauty supplies to the squirrels, but who knows, maybe I'll start a trend."

"If you're not drinking, how do you explain this?" Max said, and he held up some of the scraps of Dashiella's sincere flattery of Lawrence Block.

"Dude, I am doing the best I can with what you're giving me to work with, but that warehouse is empty—I mean spooky ghost-town empty."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Max set Dashiella back on the bookcase.

"It means—and I'm not supposed to tell you this, but seeing as you saved me from the living hell of Cutex abuse—it means that all those Greek painter and poet dudes got it wrong. We Muses don't give y'all ideas. We've never had an original thought in our lives. What we do is dig ideas out of your brains, shine 'em up a little, and serve 'em back up to you. But, dude, there is nothing up there any more. You have said all you have to say."

"That's a lie!"

"Dude, I'm telling you, I had to get out of there. I've got that what-do-ya-call-it? fear of open spaces thing."

"Agoraphobia," Max said.

"Yeah. They need to change it, though, to Maxbrainaphobia. Talk about wide open spaces."

She's lying, Max told himself. There's nothing wrong with me. I've got lots more stories to tell. The problem is her.

"But, hey, don't worry about it,"



Dashiella continued. "I'll still be your Muse. Only now I'll be helping you sell more used cars or sweep floors faster or—"

She kept on talking, but Max couldn't hear a word. His blood was pounding in his ears, and all he could think was that he was trapped. He couldn't even kill himself. Max had too much pride to leave a semiliterate, possibly plagiarized suicide note.

But . . . but he had gotten a new Muse when his old Muse died.

When she died. So Muses were not truly immortal. That meant—

Max grabbed up an unabridged dictionary and slammed it down on top of Dashiella. A few seconds later, after he caught his breath, he moved the book. The Muse was squished flat. There was no blood except for one trickle out of her mouth, but Max knew she was dead.

He stood there for a minute listening to how quiet the house was without Dashiella's incessant blithering. He had brought the dictionary down with such force that it felt as if he'd broken his pinky, but that was a small price to pay for freedom.

Freedom. Yeah, that sounded good. No more Scooby Doo reject plots. No more writer's block. No more plagiarism.

He scraped Dashiella's body off the desktop onto last week's *Time* magazine. Then he and we walked to the bathroom and unceremoniously flushed it down the toilet.

Now, thought Max, all I have to is be ready when my new Muse is assigned to me. He had no idea how

long that would take, but he wanted her to know right from the start that he meant business.

He sat down in front of his computer, deleted the file Dashiella had written, and started a new one.

Tell me I've got no more ideas. Huh, I'll show her.

Chapter One

The body was still warm when the murderer threw it off the bridge and—

Max stopped because he thought he heard a noise. Maybe it's my new Muse settling right down to work, he told himself, and he began to type even faster.

—went back to the hideout to join the rest of his gang. Now that this pesky policeman was out of the way, he could plan the next job with his friends, who were all—

There was terrific crash that sounded as though it came from downstairs. Max was startled, but he didn't stop writing. What is going on? he wondered. I know good and damn well they're not going to send me another klutzy Muse.

Hey, he thought, maybe Kimberlyn's come to her senses and returned home. Good, I'll listen to her begging and consider taking her back when I've finished this chapter, not before.

Then he heard a faint growl growing into a loud roar and felt a shiver run up his spine.

"Good," he said aloud. "Talk to me, baby. I've been thinking about switching over to horror."



He went back to work, turning his police procedural into a horror story.

—friends, who were all vampires, just like him. There was only an hour or two before sunrise, so there was no time to—

The bookcase behind Max crashed to the floor, missing him by a couple of inches as he hurled himself out of the way. His desk and his computer were nothing but splinters and sparks as the back wall of his loft exploded in a shower of dust and smoke.

Coughing and choking, Max turned to see what kind of creature could have caused this chaos.

Three serpent-haired monsters screeched and stomped around. These cawing beasts had huge black wings and faces like vultures. Their hair was a tangle of hissing snakes, and they wielded whips of fire.

Max's first thought was, I don't

think I want to write anything *that* scary.

Then the first bird sister lashed out with her flaming whip and struck him on the neck and shoulders. Max screamed. Her sisters responded to his cry, and now they were beating and burning him, too. He twisted his knee turning to flee, tripped, and fell to the floor. The bird-monsters sensed his vulnerability and moved in, whip ends slicing the air.

Before Max's brain shut down completely, he remembered the Erinyes—the avenging furies who relentlessly tormented their victims, those who had shed the blood of a mortal. They were deaf and blind and couldn't tell when they'd completed their mission, so they kept torturing people long after they'd gone mad or committed suicide.

And the Erinyes didn't even particularly like mortals. Zeus only knew what they would do to someone who'd killed an Olympian.

FICTION

So We'll Go No More A-Roving

Michelle
Knowlden



Illustration by Tim Foley

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/01

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*For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.*

Lord Byron
SO WE'LL GO NO MORE A-ROVING

Struggling to breathe, I fell against the doorframe in my office. My secretary in the anteroom ignored me. Immersed in a Victorian manuscript, my cousin Robyn walked down the hall without stopping.

I gulped and panted some more. A man carrying a small box and a throwing spear paused in front of me. "Miss, are you all right?" I noticed that he was well tanned under a shock of white hair. Too tanned for a Wisconsin winter.

"In a moment." I held up a hand to forestall assistance. Even so, the man shifted the box under his arm and the foreshaft with a tlatl to his other hand. I choked out, "Give me a minute. I'll be fine."

"I was told that you authenticate items for insurance companies," he said. My knees started to buckle. He put out his free hand to steady me.

I gasped, breathed heavily for a moment, and then said hoarsely, "I only investigate murders. Check with my partner, Gary LaMare, at the end of the hall."

He gave me an uncertain look, then dropped my elbow and turned away. Suddenly the front door flew open and a spectre, filling me with more fear than cerebral lesions could, loomed against the fading light. I grabbed the spear carrier's arm.

"If you'll come this way," I said hoarsely. "Perhaps I can help you after all." I shoved him into my office.

"Michaela," the spectre thundered.

"Sorry, Aunt Helena," I wheezed. "Can't talk now. I've got a client. See Mary to set up an appointment." I shut the door and rammed the dead-bolt home.

The whitehaired man gave me an apprehensive look. I gasped again and leaned heavily against my desk. "Sit," I said. Then added a belated, "Please."

While he obeyed, I crept around my desk and sat down also. Behind the loosely woven shade that covered the window between the anteroom and me, I saw a stout lavender form threaten my secretary. My breathing slowly eased.

"I'm not here about murder," he said. "I'm here to find out if I've got a true Clovis point or a replica." He held out a hand, this time in introduction rather than support. "I'm Harvey Cline. I just moved here last week from Tucson."

"Micky Cardex." I shook his hand and took a shuddering breath. I

poured water into two glasses, and pushed one towards him. Then I opened a bottle of acetaminophen and shook out one. He watched me as I swallowed it.

"You sure you're okay?"

I nodded. "I've a touch of dyspnea due to a brain hemorrhage. I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Dyspnea?"

"Difficulty in breathing. It comes and goes." I shook out another acetaminophen tablet for the brain hemorrhage. "Now, what can I do for you?"

He handed me the hardwood foreshaft with its launching stick or atlatl, then carefully opened the box and set it on my desk. Wrapped in clear plastic, the turquoise spear point gleamed with polished blue light. It was less than two inches long and exquisitely pressure flaked in vertical flutes down each side. Not as sharp as an arrowhead but more deadly.

"A friend told me that a collector will pay a hundred thousand or more for a real Clovis point," Cline said. "That's why I thought I'd need extra insurance."

I set the hardwood shaft on the desk and picked up the point. Paleo projectile points had been found among mammoth bones in southeastern Arizona for decades. San Pedro Valley and the Ventana cave regions were riddled with them. Even so, a serrated caribou shinbone from the Yukon or an Anasazi prayer stick wouldn't have impressed me more.

Something caught my eye near the base of the point, so I pulled out a magnifying glass and switched on the desk lamp. Yellow fibers clung to a rough edge. Something dark stained the turquoise from the point to the base. I abruptly put it back in the box.

"Mr. Cline, where did you get this?" I asked.

"I got it from a friend. So can you tell? Is it a real Clovis point or a fake?"

I picked up the foreshaft loosely coupled with the atlatl and studied where the point would be hafted on the end of the shaft. It too was stained. The tip, which would be covered by the point, was clean, but half an inch down began a darkening that covered several inches of hardwood.

The doorknob rattled, and a voice rumbled on the other side. Cline started, but I ignored it and spilled out another acetaminophen.

"Can you locate this friend of yours?" I asked.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I suppose I can, but I'd rather he didn't know I was checking up on him. He gave me the spear when he and his wife moved from Tucson. He'd had it a long time and always told us it was genuine."

The doorknob shook again, and I heard my name sounding in a muffled roar. I pressed the intercom button. "Mary. Call security."

I released the button, and delicately touched the projectile point through the plastic wrapping. "Mister Cline, I'm afraid . . ."

"You called security on your aunt?" He gave me an outraged look.

I shrugged. "It's okay. She's used to it." Helena hammered on the door and shouted a garbled threat. My esophagus constricted. Since he seemed still scandalized, I added, "She's not a blood relative."

I shut the lid on the turquoise point. "I'm afraid, Mr. Cline, that this is only a replica."

His shoulders sagged. "Are you sure? Shouldn't an expert look at it?"

"I wouldn't waste your money." Through the shade I saw one of our building security guards escort Aunt Helena to the door. She hit him with my appointment book. After the door closed, Mary turned off her computer and followed them. I took a bronchodilator from a drawer and inhaled.

"Clovis points weren't made out of turquoise," I said. "The hunters used stones like obsidian, agate, or Alibates chert. Since the foreshaft and atlatl were made of wood, the point would have outworn them thousands of years ago." I handed him the launching stick. "Flint knapping is a popular hobby, Mr. Cline. The turquoise makes it a nice keepsake."

"But not as nice as a six figure windfall. Guess Roy had the last laugh." He sighed. "Thanks, Miss Cardex. I guess I won't need insurance for it after all. Sorry I've wasted your time." He reached for the box, but I held onto it.

"You said this Roy moved away from Tucson? How long ago?" I casually tapped a finger on the lid.

His hand hung in the air for a moment, and then politely he sat back down in his chair. "I guess it was about a year ago. His wife wanted to be nearer to the grandkids. She'd pestered him about it for as long as we'd known them. My wife knew Shirley better than I. We belonged to the same Arizona Roving Club and did day hikes in the White Mountains together. I couldn't abide Shirley's whining, but Roy was good people. Fine rock scrambler, too." He stood up again. "I'm sure you've got better things to do than hear an old man ramble on and on." He reached for the box, but I held it fast.

"Sit down, Mr. Cline. I'm afraid I must ask you a few questions. Let's start with Roy and Shirley's last name."

Cline remained standing, and worry furrowed his brow. "Hey, I didn't get Roy in trouble about this point being a counterfeit, did I? I told you it was a gift."

"Please sit down, Mr. Cline," I said again. "This spear may have been used to murder someone. Before we call the police, I want to be sure of the facts."

His tanned face paled, and he sat down hard. "Murder? Why do you think someone was murdered?"

Still holding the box, I went to unbolt the door. The agency had slow-

ly emptied while we sat in my office. Smelling cold, damp air, I shut the window in the waiting room. At the other end of the hall I saw light from Gary LaMare's office and heard stirrings in the lab.

"Come with me, Mr. Cline," I said. Reluctantly he followed me down the hall. Partway to the lab I fell into a coughing spasm, but it ended as I stumbled into the room. Still reading from the Victorian manuscript, Robyn sat at the counter and drank tea warmed by a Bunsen burner.

"Mr. Cline, this is my cousin Robyn Cardex. When she's not working on her thesis or authenticating manuscripts for my partner, she assists me in murder investigations." Without looking up, she raised a hand in greeting. "Robyn, this is Harvey Cline. I think this spear of his may have been used to kill someone."

"Okay," she mumbled and turned a page.

"You keep saying that," Cline said. "How do you know?"

I took the foreshaft from him. "See this dark stain here?" He nodded. I opened the box and gingerly unwrapped the projectile point, taking care not to dislodge the yellow fibers at the base. "See the same dark stain there?"

Cline swallowed. "You think it's blood?"

I nodded. Still concentrating on the pages before her, Robyn swept blonde hair out of her eyes. "And because the stain is about six inches long," I continued. "There's a good chance a murder happened."

"How do you know it's not animal blood? Roy used to do some hunting."

"Did he?" I paused for a moment, then took a large towel out of a cupboard and put it in the sink. "It's not animal blood, Mr. Cline. Whoever had this spear thrust into him was clothed." I turned on the cold water and soaked the towel. "Know anyone who wore yellow?"

He shook his head, walked over to a stool, and sat down. "It's Lipscombe, by the way. Roy and Shirley Lipscombe."

I wrung the towel out and wound it around my head, turban style. My raging headache lessened. Then the phone rang, and the pain returned full force.

"Hello?" Robyn said into the phone. She listened for a moment, and then her eyebrows rose and she glanced at me. "It's your secretary. She says Aunt Helena's been arrested for assaulting a security guard. Know anything about it?"

"Yeah. Tell her I'd like to speak with the arresting officer."

I found a plastic bag in the cupboard and put it over the bloody end of the foreshaft. Then I used rubber-tipped forceps to carefully remove the point from its plastic wrap. Robyn handed me the phone.

"Who is this?" I said into the mouthpiece. "Oh, hello, Bob. Yes, I know. Yes, she's certainly a menace. Which security guard did she assault? Well, that's okay then—Oliver never presses charges. No soul in her bosom and a danger to society? Isn't that rather strong language, Bob?"

And do you think a court appearance is such a good idea? Half the judges in the county used to play golf with my uncle. Guess what they'll say when you bring his poor defenseless widow before them in shackles? You're right—defenseless wasn't the right word. Thanks, Bob, that's probably the best thing to do." I took another look at the point in front of me. "And hey, after you drop Helena off at her place, would you stop by the office? I think I may have something for you."

I hung up the phone. Robyn went back to her manuscript.

"Miss Cardex? I've been thinking. Roy wore a lot of sweaters. Maybe he had a yellow one. Can you tell if that fiber's wool?"

I frowned. "If Roy gave you the spear, how could this be his blood?"

Looking embarrassed, he glanced down at his feet. "Roy didn't exactly hand it to me. About a week before they left, the four of us spent the weekend at my mountain cabin. One last hike, you understand. My wife went home with them to help them pack, and I stayed on to do some fishing. When I got back to the house, the Lipscombes had already left. My wife told me that Roy said if I found anything in the house I wanted, I should go ahead and take it. They left odds and ends for the next tenant. I spotted the spear stashed behind some lumber in the garage, but he said whatever I wanted, right?"

"Did anyone see both Lipscombes leave?"

"My wife did."

"Can you think of anyone who disappeared in the time you knew the Lipscombes?"

"No. No one."

We sat for a moment in silence. "Well, Mr. Cline, we have about twenty minutes before the police arrive. Let's see what we can find out."

I walked over to Robyn's Bunsen burner. "You asked me if I could tell if the fibers were wool. I know they are protein fibers by their look and texture. It's probably either wool or silk, but there's only one sure way to determine which."

I carefully snipped off half the threads, picked up a tweezer-full, and lit it with the Bunsen flame. Robyn moved her manuscript a few inches away without looking up. "What does this smell like?" I asked, and thrust the smoking fibers under Robyn's nose.

Startled, she reared back. "Jeez, Micky, what's wrong with you?"

"Come on, Robyn, what's it smell like? Burning hair?"

She gave me a disgusted look and returned to her reading. "More like burning vomit," she growled.

"Hmm," I said. "Then it's silk, not wool. Know anyone who wore yellow silk, Mr. Cline?"

"Shirley wore a lot of silk blouses." There was foreboding in his eyes.

I wrapped the point back in its plastic. It occurred to me that Bob wasn't going to be pleased with me for contaminating the evidence. I put the thought aside, along with the fake Clovis point.

"Do you have the Lipscombes' new phone number and address?"

"Sorry. We were mostly just hiking friends. My wife might have gotten it for our Christmas card list."

"Then I think we should call your wife."

Cline scratched his head and gave me a pained look. "My wife doesn't know I'm here, Miss Cardex. Fact is, she doesn't know that I have the spear."

"She doesn't?"

"No. If she knew Roy'd left it behind, she'd make me give it back to him."

"I see." For a minute, I stared sightlessly at the flame under Robyn's flask of tea. Then I said again, "I see."

I unwound the towel from my head and took a deep breath. Already my bronchial tubes felt clearer, and my mind as well. "Would you give me your phone number, sir? Your wife needn't know why I'm calling."

I dialed the number he gave me, but no one answered. I glanced inquiringly at Cline.

"Maybe she's at the bus station," he offered. "She wanted to get a schedule today. I'm taking a fishing trip at the end of the month, so she decided to visit friends in Chicago at the same time. Try her cell phone number." He dictated the number as I dialed.

"Mrs. Cline? This is Michaela Cardex at the Cardex & LaMare Insurance Agency. I'm currently at our Tucson branch office. A Lipscombe, and I'm not sure if it was Mr. or Mrs. Lipscombe, called about a claim yesterday. I seem to have misplaced their new address and phone number, but fortunately they'd left me your name as a contact. I'm hoping you can help me. You have it? Excellent. Would you spell that street name for me? Thank you, Mrs. Cline. I do appreciate this." I hung up and frowned over the address I'd written down.

"She said they moved to Chicago," I said.

Cline looked puzzled. "That's funny. I thought Shirley's kids lived in Miami."

"Not his children, too?"

"No. They're Shirley's kids from her first husband. Roy lost most of his pension fund in a company merger, so he lives off his Social Security and handouts whenever Shirley feels generous. Her first husband left a nice trust fund for her and the kids."

Keeping my thoughts to myself, I dialed the Lipscombes' phone number.

"Hello? I have a package for Shirley Lipscombe that's been delivered to my house by mistake. May I speak with her? Oh, I am sorry to hear that. How long ago did she pass away? Wow, these blouses must have been back-ordered for a long time. Yes, I'm sorry, I did open the package before I realized it wasn't mine. Yes, three blouses. All yellow. Mr. Lipscombe, are you still there? Shall I return them to the sender? No, it's no

problem. Don't worry about it. Again, please accept my condolences, and I apologize for disturbing you." I hung up the phone.

Cline's Arizona tan had faded listening to the one-sided conversation. Robyn rubbed her nose and turned another page.

"Shirley's dead?" he asked.

"Yes. Roy Lipscombe said she had a heart attack."

He looked up hopefully. "A heart attack? Then she wasn't murdered." He heaved a sigh of relief. "Miss Cardex, you had me worried. And you've called the police for nothing."

"I guess so."

"Then, if I'm finished here, I'll take the spear and go home."

I stopped him from reaching for the foreshaft and the box containing the turquoise point. "If I was wrong about the murder, Mr. Cline, it's conceivable that I was wrong about the authenticity of the Clovis point. If you'll allow me, I'll take it to a friend at the museum and have her look at it. The museum is open late tonight."

"Well, thank you. That's good of you."

"Shall I return it afterwards to your place?"

"No," he said hastily. "My wife is home tonight. Could you bring it to my house after ten tomorrow morning? She has an appointment downtown with a financial advisor then."

I raised an eyebrow. "Does she? Mr. Cline, do you or your wife also have a trust fund?"

He grinned. "No. Our official place of residence is California. Community property is the way we went. Don't even have life insurance. No one will profit by our dying."

"Financial matters are rarely simple, so educating yourself about them can't hurt. May I suggest you go to the meeting with your wife and her financial advisor tomorrow morning? I can drop the spear by later."

He shrugged. "If you think so. My wife usually handles the books. Okay—let me give you a card with our address on it. I'll call you tomorrow."

It was quiet in the lab after he left. Between my towel dripping in the sink and the dry turning of pages, only the harsh sound of my breathing and the pounding in my head disturbed the silence.

"Robyn, I may not make it before Bob gets here. My brain is hemorrhaging."

She didn't look up. "So that's what's wrong with you this time," she muttered. "I wondered about the turban."

"Robyn? Are you paying attention? If I should die in the next two minutes, you'll have to give the police my report."

She glanced up irritably. "Talk fast. I'd like to finish this manuscript tonight."

"Shirley Lipscombe never left Tucson. Her cardiac failure was a spear thrust through the heart."

Robyn gave me an astonished look. "What are you talking about, Micky? Who's Shirley Lipscombe?"

"Pay attention, cousin. Her husband—Roy Lipscombe killed her, and it looks like Harvey Cline's wife helped. Since she claimed she saw Shirley leave Tucson with Roy, and Shirley never left, she had to be in on it. She's definitely leaving Cline at the end of the month. She's making travel and financial arrangements as we speak."

"What?"

"Focus, Robyn. Lipscombe killed his wife for the money and to be with Cline's wife. Shirley's husband and Harvey's wife had more than the roving club in common. Fortunately for Harvey Cline, divorce—not murder—will lay his marriage to rest."

"What?"

"Here's Lipscombe's address in Chicago, and here's where the Clines will be tonight. Make sure Bob knows that. And give him the foreshaft and this box. It's the murder weapon."

"What?"

The front bell rang.

"Never mind. I guess I lived. I'll tell Bob myself"

I paused to breathe, then looked at Robyn. She stared back with glazed eyes. Her hands fiercely gripped the bound pages. "Guess they'll go no more a roving, eh?" She started to speak, then shook her head, bewildered.

Before I left the lab, she'd buried herself in dusty words once again.

Note to Our Readers: If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE NIGHT WE ALL HAD GRIPPE

Shirley Jackson



Illustration by Winifred Way

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 301

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We are all of us, in our family, very fond of puzzles. I do Double Crostics and read mystery stories, my husband does baseball box scores and figures out batting averages, our son Laurie is addicted to the kind of puzzle that begins, "There are fifty-four items in this picture beginning with the letter C," our older daughter Jannie does children's jigsaws, and Sally, the baby, can put together an intricate little arrangement of rings and bars that has had the rest of us stopped for two months. We are none of us, however, capable of solving the puzzles we work up for ourselves in the oddly diffuse patterns of our several lives (who is, now I think of it?); and along with such family brainteasers as "Why is there a pair of roller skates in Mommy's desk?" and "What is *really* in the back of Laurie's closet?" and "Why doesn't Daddy wear the nice shirts Jannie picked out for Father's Day?" we are all of us still wondering nervously about what might be called The Great Grippe Mystery. As a matter of fact, I should be extremely grateful if anyone could solve it for us because we are certainly very short of blankets and it's annoying not to have *any* kind of answer. Here, in rough outline, is our puzzle:

Our house is large, and the second floor has four bedrooms and a bathroom, all opening out onto a long narrow hall that we have made even narrower by lining it with bookcases so that every inch of hall that is not doorway is books. As is the case with most houses, both the front door and the back door are downstairs on the first floor. The front bedroom, which is my husband's and mine, is the largest and lightest and has a double bed. The room next down the hall belongs to the girls and contains a crib and a single, short bed. Laurie's room, across the hall, has a double-decker bed, and he sleeps on the top half. The guest room, at the end of the hall, has a double bed. The double bed in our room is made up with white sheets and cases, the baby's crib has pink linen, and Jannie's bed has yellow. Laurie's bed has green linen and the guest room has blue. The bottom half of Laurie's bed is never made up, unless company is going to use it immediately, because the dog, whose name is Toby, traditionally spends a large part of his time there and regards it as his bed. There is no bed table on the distaff side of the double bed in our room. One side of the bed in the guest room is pushed against the wall. No one can fit into the baby's crib except the baby; the ladder to the top half of Laurie's double-decker is very shaky and stands in a corner of the room; the children reach the top half of the bed by climbing up over the footboard. All three of the children are accustomed to having a glass of apple juice, to which they are addicted, by their bedsides at night. My husband invariably keeps a glass of water by *his* bedside. Laurie uses a green glass, Jannie uses a red glass, the

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baby uses one of those little flowered cheese glasses, and my husband uses a tin glass because he has broken so many ordinary glasses trying to find them in the dark.

I do not take cough drops or cough medicine in any form.

The baby customarily sleeps with half a dozen cloth books, an armless doll, and a small cardboard suitcase that holds the remnants of half a dozen decks of cards. Jannie is very partial to a pink baby blanket, which has shrunk from many washings. The girls' room is very warm, the guest room moderately so; our room is chilly, and Laurie's room is quite cold. We are all of us, including the dog, notoriously easy and heavy sleepers; my husband never eats coffeecake.

My husband caught the grippe first, on a Friday, and snarled and shivered and complained until I prevailed upon him to go to bed. By Friday night both Laurie and the baby were feverish, and on Saturday Jannie and I began to cough and snifle. In our family we take ill in different manners; my husband is extremely annoyed at the whole procedure and is convinced that his being sick is somebody else's fault, Laurie tends to become a little lightheaded and strew handkerchiefs around his room, Jannie coughs and coughs and coughs, the baby turns bright red, and I suffer in stoical silence so long as everyone knows clearly that I am sick. We are each of us privately convinced that our own ailment is far more severe than anyone else's. At any rate, on Saturday night I put all the children into their beds, gave each of them half an aspirin and the usual fruit juice, covered them warmly, and then settled my husband down for the night with his glass of water and his cigarettes and matches and ashtray; he had decided to sleep in the guest room because it was warmer. At about ten o'clock I checked to see that all the children were covered and asleep and that Toby was in his place on the bottom half of the double-decker. I then took two sleeping pills and went to sleep in my own bed in my own room. Because my husband was in the guest room, I slept on his side of the bed, next to the bed table. I put my cigarettes and matches on the endtable next to the ashtray along with a small glass of brandy, which I find more efficacious than cough medicine.

I woke up some time later to find Jannie standing beside the bed. "Can't sleep," she said. "Want to come in *your* bed."

"Come along," I said. "Bring your own pillow."

She went and got her pillow and her small pink blanket and her glass of fruit juice, which she put on the floor next to the bed, since she had gotten the side without any endtable. She put her pillow down, rolled herself in her pink blanket, and fell asleep. I went back to sleep, but sometime later the baby came in, asking sleepily, "Where's Jannie?"

"She's here," I said. "Are you coming in bed with us?"

"Yes," said the baby.

"Go and get your pillow, then," I said. She returned with her pillow, her books, her doll, her suitcase, and her fruit juice, which she put on the floor next to Jannie's. Then she crowded in comfortably next to Jannie and fell asleep. Eventually the pressure of the two of them began to force me uneasily toward the edge of the bed, so I rolled out wearily, took my pillow and my small glass of brandy and my cigarettes and matches and my ashtray and went into the guest room, where my husband was asleep. I pushed at him and he snarled, but finally moved over to the side next to the wall, and I put my cigarettes and matches and my brandy and my ashtray on the endtable next to his cigarettes and matches and ashtray and tin glass of water and put my pillow on the bed and fell asleep. Shortly after this he woke me and asked me to let him get out of the bed, since it was too hot in that room to sleep and he was going back to his own bed.

He took his pillow and his cigarettes and matches and his ashtray and his tin glass of water and went padding off down the hall. In a few minutes Laurie came into the guest room, where I'd just fallen asleep again; he was carrying his pillow and his glass of fruit juice. "Too cold in my room," he said, and I moved out of the way and let him get in the bed on the side next to the wall. After a few minutes the dog came in, whining nervously, and came up onto the bed and curled himself up around Laurie, and I had to get out or be smothered. I gathered together what of my possessions I could and made my way into my own room, where my husband was asleep with Jannie on one side and the baby on the other. Jannie woke up when I came in and said, "Own bed," so I helped her carry her pillow and her fruit juice and her pink blanket back to her own bed.

The minute Jannie got out of our bed the baby rolled over and turned sideways so there was no room for me. I could not get in the crib and I could not climb in the top half of the double-decker, so since the dog was in the guest room, I went and took the blanket off the crib and got in the bottom half of the double-decker, setting my brandy and my cigarettes and matches and my ashtray on the floor next to the bed. Shortly after that Jannie, who apparently felt left out, came in with her pillow and her pink blanket and her fruit juice and got up into the top half of the double-decker, leaving her fruit juice on the floor next to my brandy.

At about six in the morning the dog wanted to get out, or else he wanted his bed back, because he came and stood next to me and howled. I got up and went downstairs, sneezing, and let him out and then decided that since it had been so cold anyway in the bottom half of the double-decker I might as well stay downstairs and heat up some coffee and have that much warmth at least. While I was waiting for the

coffee to heat, Jannie came to the top of the stairs and asked if I would bring *her* something hot, and I heard Laurie stirring in the guest room, so I heated some milk and put it into a jug and decided that while I was at it I might just as well give everybody something hot, so I set out enough cups for everyone and brought out a coffeecake and put it on the tray and added some onion rolls for my husband, who does not eat coffeecake. When I took the tray upstairs, Laurie and Jannie were both in the guest room, giggling, so I put the tray down in there and heard Baby waking from our room in the front. I went to get her, and she was sitting up in the bed talking to her father, who was only very slightly awake. "Play card?" she was asking brightly, and she opened her suitcase and dealt him onto the pillow next to his nose four diamonds to the ace jack and the seven of clubs.

I asked my husband if he would like some coffee, and he said it was terribly cold. I suggested that he come down into the guest room, where it was warmer. He and the baby followed me down to the guest room, and my husband and Laurie got into the bed and the rest of us sat on the foot of the bed and I poured the coffee and the hot milk and gave the children coffeecake and my husband the onion rolls. Jannie decided to take her milk and coffeecake back into her own bed, and since she had mislaid her pillow, she took one from the guest room bed. Baby of course followed her, going first back into our room to pick up *her* pillow. My husband fell asleep again while I was pouring his coffee, and Laurie set his hot milk precariously on the headboard of the bed and asked me to get his pillow from wherever it was, so I went in to the double-decker and got him the pillow from the top, which turned out to be Jannie's, and her pink blanket was with it.

I took my coffeecake and my coffee into my own bed and had just settled down when Laurie came in to say cloudily that Daddy had kicked him out of bed and could he stay in here? I said of course, and he said he would get a pillow, and he came back in a minute with the one from the bottom half of the double-decker, which was mine. He went to sleep right away, and then the baby came in to get her books and her suitcase and decided to stay with her milk and her coffeecake, so I left and went into the guest room and made my husband move over and sat *there* and had my coffee. Meanwhile, Jannie had moved into the top half of the double-decker, looking for her pillow, and had taken instead the pillow from baby's bed and my glass of brandy and had settled down there to listen to Laurie's radio. I went downstairs to let the dog in, and he came upstairs and got into his bed on the bottom half of the double-decker, and while I was gone, my husband had moved back over onto the accessible side of the guest room bed, so I went into Jannie's bed, which is rather too short, and I brought a pillow from the guest room and my coffee.

At about nine o'clock the Sunday papers came and I went down to get them, and at about nine thirty everyone woke up. My husband had moved back into his own bed when Laurie and Baby vacated it for their own beds, Laurie driving Jannie into the guest room when he took back the top half of the double-decker, and my husband woke up at nine thirty and found himself wrapped in Jannie's pink blanket, sleeping on Laurie's green pillow, and with a piece of coffeecake and Baby's fruit juice glass, not to mention the four diamonds to the ace jack and the seven of clubs. Laurie in the top half of the double-decker had my glass of brandy and my cigarettes and matches and the baby's pink pillow. The dog had my white pillow and my ashtray. Jannie in the guest room had one white pillow and one blue pillow and two glasses of fruit juice and my husband's cigarettes and matches and ashtray and Laurie's hot milk, besides her own hot milk and coffeecake and her father's onion rolls. The baby in her crib had her father's tin glass of water and her suitcase and books and doll and a blue pillow from the guest room, but no blanket.

The puzzle, is, of course, what became of the blanket from Baby's bed? I took it off her crib and put it on the bottom half of the double-decker, but the dog did not have it when he woke up, and neither did any of the other beds. It was a blue-patterned patchwork blanket and has not been seen since, and I would most particularly like to know where it got to. As I say, we are very short of blankets.

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



City of Light (Dell, \$6.99), Lauren Belfer's compelling historical novel set in turn of the century Buffalo, New York, is long and richly detailed with the hopes and controversy surrounding the new science of electrical power, the machinations of politicians and local businessmen, and the growing foothold of organized labor. Rather than the themes of romance and dynastic family tragedies traditional to historical sagas, this first-person narrative of a series of incidents in the life of headmistress Louisa Barrett offers up more history than mystery, yet the book is as suspenseful as the average whodunit. Admirers of Caleb Carr's historical police procedurals will relish this one.

Monica Ferris's **A Stitch in Time** (Berkley, \$5.99) brings back Betsy Devonshire as winter descends on her adopted home of Excelsior, Minnesota, where she owns a needlework shop. Betsy and her loyal coterie of staff and customers are keeping warm by keeping busy: the shop Betsy inherited from her sister is beginning to recover from the loss of its previous owner. As many of the folks in Betsy's circle are helping to renovate the local church, it's not surprising that the rector's discovery of an old tapestry that requires repair leads him to Betsy for help. She readily agrees. Alas, this charitable deed of Betsy's is repaid with several near-fatal rewards. Ferris offers readers a comfy setting replete with loads of good-humored charm, as well as a free needlework design. This cosy series will please devotees of TV's Jessica Fletcher.

In Kay Hooper's latest, **Out of the Shadows** (Bantam, \$6.50), a psychopathic serial killer is operating in the quiet town of Gladstone, Tennessee. For Sheriff Miranda Knight, this poses a double threat. Not only is she sworn publicly to protect and safeguard the citizens of Gladstone, she has also vowed privately that nothing will harm her little sister. Not ever again. To catch this fiend, however, Miranda must call in FBI profiler and psychic investigator Noah Bishop. By doing so, she puts herself and her sister at risk of having their past revealed—and

perhaps even places their very lives in deadly danger. Although Bishop has appeared in Hooper's other novels, this one is really Miranda's story. Mary Higgins Clark fans will appreciate this fast-paced thriller laced with romance and set on emotionally dangerous ground.

Stephen Booth's first novel, **Black Dog** (Scribner, \$24), is a rare treat for lovers of classical British police procedurals. Set in the northern Peak District, the novel opens with a search of the countryside for a missing teenage girl. It's hot work for local lad, Detective Constable Ben Cooper, back his first day after vacation. For his ambitious partner Diane Fry, who was recently transferred from an urban beat, it's enviable work—as the newcomer she's been stuck at the station house. In the short span of the investigation Cooper will follow his instincts to catch a killer, but he'll break every rule doing so. Diane will competitively tag along, aggressively following procedure to the letter and chafing Cooper relentlessly. Booth has created two very strong-minded characters who complement one another beautifully at the same time that they drive each other crazy. The plot is multilayered with enough detail about the protagonists to add intimacy without bogging down the murder story. I hope we'll see more of Cooper and Fry.

In Carol Smith's **Family Reunion** (Warner, \$23.95), French-born Odile Annesley has lived in self-imposed exile in the French farmhouse of her birth for forty years, ever since a family tragedy inexplicably caused her to leave behind a blissful marriage and a brood of children in England. Now she's written to her scattered grandchildren and invited them for a visit. Smith draws lively portraits of the British cousins, five completely individual young women and one bossy male, and spices the brew with a dashing handsome young man who has been wooing each one separately. Adding to the puzzle, the heirs arrive to find an empty chateau, a recent unmarked grave, and local whispers of a brutal serial killer who has long stalked the vicinity. This is a quirky, witty story that's refreshingly different from the pack.

Stephen White's depiction of life in the witness protection program, with its memorable characters, non-stop tension, and twisty plot, is an irresistible read. Although Colorado psychologist Alan Gregory and his wife have appeared in White's previous novels, in **The Program** (Doubleday, \$24.95), Gregory is just a supporting player. The heroine here is Kirsten Lord, a district attorney who successfully prosecuted a mobster, only to find herself and her family the object of his vengeance. His threat was made good when Kirsten's husband was shot before her eyes. After her young daughter barely escapes an abduction attempt, Kirsten reluctantly joins the FBI Security Program and is sent to Boulder, Colorado. There she meets an unlikely and unexpected ally in Carl Luppo, also a protected witness, a solitary and lonely man who has been in the program for years. Carl Luppo was once a mob hit man, and he

(continued on page 142)

THE STORY THAT WON

The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by John Malia of Peru, Maine. Honorable mentions go to Don Townsend of Tuscaloosa, Alabama; Kathleen Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Judy Shenk of Aberdeen, Maryland; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Will Ludwigsen of



Jacksonville, Florida; Tom Sweeney of Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Richard L. Williamson of Hayward, California; Patty G. Dennis of Indianapolis, Indiana; Wes Dawson of Scottsboro, Alabama; Mark Barstead of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; and Regina M. Sestak of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Agence France-Presse / Robyn Mayes

PATRICK POTTER'S PUMPKIN PIES by John Malia

Patrick Potter's large pumpkin patch was being raided regularly by the orphan kids at the edge of the grove, so Mr. Potter hired some uniformed guards to protect the pumpkins. So he thought.

"It's not working, Mr. Potter. The kids are small, determined, and hungry, and they keep getting by us. The patch is too large for only eight guards," said Guard McFarlin.

"Well, I've got a business to run, McFarlin, and every pumpkin counts. I can't make my famous Patrick Potter's Pumpkin Pies with watermelons!" shouted Potter.

Guard McFarlin scratched his chin, thought for a minute, and said, "We could put up a sign saying that we poisoned a pumpkin. That would keep them away."

"It seems a pretty drastic solution to kill someone, but go ahead and give it a try," said Potter.

"No, no, you don't understand, Potter. We don't actually poison a pumpkin, we just put up a sign that reads ONE OF THESE PUMPKINS IS POISONED. Of course, they will not know which one, so they won't take any and the raids should stop."

"Good. Do it, McFarlin; that should stop the little rascals."

The next morning Guard McFarlin reported to Mr. Potter.

"You're out of business, Potter."

"What! What are you talking about?"

"I put out the sign like you said, but the rascals changed the wording."

"Well, what does it say now?"

"It says, TWO OF THESE PUMPKINS ARE POISONED."

(continued from page 140)

was very good at his job. Now he senses that Kirsten has been compromised—and he's right. White's publisher is touting this book as a perfect choice for Jonathan Kellerman's legions of fans, and I can't argue with that.

It takes a special kind of writing skill to sustain reader interest and build suspense over the course of a four hundred page novel set on a tiny, isolated San Juan island inhabited solely by a middle-aged woman recovering from a recent battle with clinical depression. That is Laurie R. King's challenge in **Folly** (Bantam, \$23.95), and she pulls it off brilliantly. In a large part this is due to the character of Rae. Folly is the small island where an uncle she never knew found peace after years of aimless wandering upon his return from World War I. Rae comes to Folly to bury the ashes of her second family, the beloved husband and young daughter taken from her in a tragic accident. There, in a place free of medications and psychiatrists, she can give in to her fears of "Watchers" in the shadows without reprisal from her elder daughter, who is too anxious, perhaps, to commit Rae and thus control her fortune. King explores recent events as well as the earlier tragedy of Rae's uncle to reveal a dark family secret of murder. Meanwhile, readers begin to suspect that perhaps Rae's apparent paranoia isn't all delusional. History, mystery, and the small details of living outdoors and alone are woven together here in a mesmerizing tale.

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":

Arthur Cress fatally stabbed his brother-in-law Carl Hanks, who had turned informer.

| POS. IN LINE | HUSBAND & WIFE | MAIDEN NAME | HUSBAND'S BIRTHPL. | WIFE'S BIRTHPL. |
|-----------------|------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 10 | George & Mary Dawson | Jenkins | Utah | Utah |
| 9 | Bart & Quilla Anderson | Ingalls | Penn. | Mont. |
| 8 | Emil & Teresa Ingalls | Gilson | Mont. | R.I. |
| 7 | Harry & Rosa Fletcher | Hanks | S.C. | S.C. |
| 6 | Arthur & Ophelia Cress | Elgin | Va. | Okla. |
| 5 | Carl & Velma Hanks | Cress | Tex. | Tenn. |
| 4 | James & Nellie Elgin | Anderson | Nev. | Nev. |
| 3 | Frank & Paula Barker | Dawson | R.I. | Tex. |
| 2 | Dave & Ursula Jenkins | Fletcher | Okla. | Va. |
| 1 | Ian & Sandra Gilson | Barker | Tenn. | Penn. |

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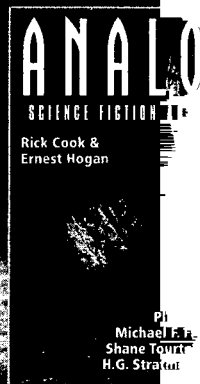
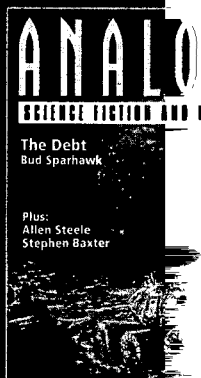
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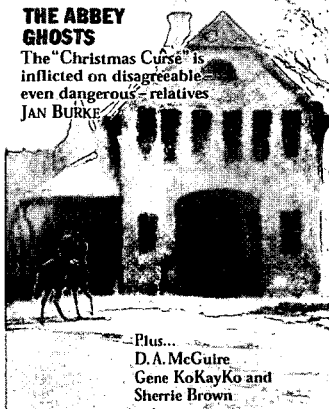
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